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# Grieve If You Want

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Travis S Ray  
University of Mississippi  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2011

May 2016  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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**Abstract**

This collection of short stories is trying to say something about empathy. It's trying to connect with readers in an effort to convey some small kind of emotion the characters are experiencing. It's about the difficulty we all have connecting and communicating with each other and ourselves.

## Table of Contents

I. All of Them Were About a Half Step Flat.....	1
II. Deacon Blues.....	11
III. Bedfellows.....	31
IV. Sam and Angie.....	43
V. If I Met My Father.....	52
VI. Where We Were Getting Away From.....	62
VII. A Real Character.....	71
VIII. Credit Card Jukebox.....	83
IX. Grieve If You Want.....	90

## I. All of Them Were About a Half Step Flat

Three weeks ago, on a brisk November evening, seated near the front of the newly renovated Hernando High School multi-purpose auditorium, I realized for certain that my wife, through her involvement in the local community theatre, had decided to step out on me.

As I sat in the audience watching a fake version of the real cheating, I was most disturbed by the fact that the man Ashley was sleeping with was Mormon. Outrage overwhelmed me for several reasons. The Mormons I knew in high school were terribly, annoyingly reverent. In their wallets they kept cards with instructions to keep themselves from masturbating. They didn't kiss their girlfriends. Their girlfriends wouldn't show their shoulders or even much more of their arm. How could a married man forsake his faith so basely? Why couldn't Ashley's co-star be more God-fearing?

On the other hand, I was furious for not figuring things out sooner. Mormons are known for craving more than one woman, aren't they? How could I have been so blind?

The night I saw the premiere of *Into the Woods* everything that had been swirling around for weeks, for months, became suddenly clear. My wife had changed when she had our first child. It was a hard pregnancy and a hard birth and she didn't seem like the girl I married anymore. For a while I wondered if she had postpartum depression, but she talked to some doctors and it wasn't that. But she wasn't as happy as she used to be. Although how could I know how happy she was until her unhappiness started affecting my own well-being?

It's true that things have been hard since Ellie was born. The builder I used to work for hasn't built anything in years now, so I've been working at Home Depot since just after we found out Ellie was on the way. I knew things would get especially tough after Ellie came, because Ashley'd have to stop teaching choir at the middle school.

So Ashley wasn't feeling fulfilled, we were broke, we were in debt to her brother, and I know it bothered her that she was having so much trouble losing the baby weight because she hardly let me look at her with her clothes off anymore. I get how she feels, but she's the mother of my child, to me she's lovely. She was never what you'd call an exhibitionist anyhow (though you wouldn't know that looking at the costume she paraded around in on that stage).

I wouldn't say I was *unhappy* even through all of this. I understood that things are hard sometimes, and sometimes in marriages you have to soldier on. I was just waiting on things to get better. To get a little bit more like they used to be.

And then, suddenly, her mood changed. The gloom vanished from our house. The band director from the school had called and told her there was a perfect role for her in the local community theatre's production of *Into the Woods*, and he was auditioning too. Things improved for a while then. Ashley spent less time alone with the television in our bedroom. She fixed me breakfast again, she helped with Ellie more in the evening and dinner was often ready when I got home at the end of the day. She bought one of those workout DVDs and lost so much weight I was worried about her until the weight loss leveled out. We started having sex again—though it wasn't really like it had been before. It was less affectionate. She was less involved.

After she auditioned and won the role of the baker's wife, her participation in family life disappeared as the frequency of rehearsals picked up. She rushed out the door as soon as I returned from work, practically dropping Ellie on me in her hurry to get to practice. At first I was pleased that she had something to be excited about. Well, I mean, it never bothered me that she found an interest. I did wish she could be enthusiastic about our life together, but I know things slow down. I know that.

I know that well. You know, I remember a while back a couple of the guys at work were talking about their wives at lunch. Me and Johnny and Greg and Julio were at the Subway right near Home Depot. Johnny and Greg were bitching about the lunches their wives usually packed them. Somehow this got around to us all talking about how often we got laid. Johnny was bragging that he got laid almost every night. Greg said he was just waiting until he could get a divorce. Julio smiled and wouldn't say a word. I told them I had no complaints. I guess what I'm saying is things could always be better and things could always be worse. At least that's what I tried to think.

When Ashley got the part, she assured me rehearsals always ended at ten. In the beginning they usually did. She'd come home after Ellie had been down for hours, walk in and kiss her and then collapse in the bed. I'd ask her about rehearsal, and she'd always tell me things were fine. I'd ask her about the people she was rehearsing with and she'd tell me I didn't know any of the people anyhow. This was true, I guess. I never met any of them.

Gradually the rehearsal times got later. She told me they were finishing up choreography so they went a little longer. Then it was tech week and she wasn't getting home until after midnight. Then it was dress rehearsals. One night I woke up as she slipped into bed and the clock said four thirty. She'd gone out with people afterwards, she said. I'm not sure where they could have been that late, but I was half asleep and I'd never had any reason not to believe her before. All these pieces began to come together when I saw the play.

I came opening night, the proud, dutiful husband. My parents kept Ellie, and I sat near the front, in the middle. What a view I had. The auditorium was beautiful for a Mississippi public school. The entire audience was slightly sloped with theatre seating and the room still smelled

new, like fresh rubber or carpet or something. There was a deep orchestra pit in front of the flat black stage.

That first night I realized what I had been sensing all along. *Into the Woods* isn't much of a musical, and I've seen my fair share. Ashley used to do them in high school and she's directed a few for the middle school. It's no *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It's no *Guys and Dolls*. I mean some shows have rocking music, some have plots. *Into the Woods* is sort of a half-hearted retelling of old fairy tales half-heartedly put to music. Some of the melodies, well, I don't know if I'd call them melodies. It's just syncopated lyrics about going to grandmother's house, with some notes flying around underneath.

I guess what I saw on that first night, what really let me know what was going on, was the way Ashley looked with the guy playing Cinderella's prince. He looked so stocky in his silly royal purple tunic and imitation riding pants. With his plastic crown upon his sandy blond head. What kind of a grown man still has blond hair? It shouldn't come as a surprise that he's the very same band director Ashley used to work with. The one who convinced her to audition. You ever watch those behind the scenes type shows? The ones with all the celebrity gossip? Ashley watches that shit all the time, and most of it's garbage, but one thing I remember them always talking about is chemistry. The chemistry actors and actresses have when they're acting. Do they look like they're really in love or lust or whatever it is. Well, Ashley and this band director had chemistry like you wouldn't believe.

Their scene together, in this sorry jumble of tired fairy tales, consisted of Ashley, the baker's wife (who ever heard of a fairy tale about a baker and his wife wanting a baby anyway), getting seduced by Cinderella's prince. How great is that? While I'm realizing my wife's



adultery, she is playing a character who is committing adultery. Art imitates life? God, you could really buy that scene too. The kiss was electric. They ought to win an Oscar. It made me sick.

The first night, I'll admit, I was kind of in shock. I just sat there and let the music play over and around me—I couldn't really hear it anymore. Later, after the curtain call all the actors come out and say hello in the lobby of the auditorium. She came up shyly, smiling, like a kid who knows he's done something sweet for his mother.

"Great job," I said. I kept cutting my eyes to the side, looking for old Prince Charming. I didn't find him, but I bet he was talking to his own wife. Ashley leaned in for a hug and I embraced her, stiffly.

"You couldn't tell I missed that one cue?" she asked.

"No. Not at all. Everything I saw looked great. Really convincing, you know what I mean?"

"Uh, thanks," she said. "Are you ok? You're acting kind of—"

A plump woman dressed in all black tapped her on the shoulder and said, "notes in two minutes."

"Sorry, babe, see you later," Ashley said, and returned to the auditorium.

They all went out afterwards (she says; who knows who all really went out) to celebrate so I didn't have a chance to confront her or anything. I didn't really want to. It was all still rolling around in my head.

I mean what do you do in a situation like that? What's the response? There's shock, you know. There's denial. There's anger. Mostly I was just sad. I don't know if you'd call me old-fashioned or what, but I don't want to be with a woman if she's unfaithful. I don't even want to talk about it. There are things you can't take back. The only endpoint I could see, at the time, is

that we should split up. But what about Ellie? That's what troubled me the most. I know a lot of people from broken homes turn out fine but a lot of them don't. I never wanted that for her.

I also thought a lot about the first time we had sex. It just kept running through my head. The summer after our freshman year of college I was taking a summer class and I was staying at a friend of mine's house because the dorms were too expensive in the summer. Ashley came to visit a weekend my friend was out of town. There was supposed to be a meteor shower one night and we went out in the backyard and put down a blanket and we were laying there and drinking some wine and smoking cigarettes and we were still in love, you know? Like nothing got to me about her. Nothing annoyed me, nothing hurt me, there was no unresolved or lurking badness—and she was the same way. We didn't fight. And I remember it was pretty dark. There was no moon. I remember it was so dark I accidentally lit the filter of a cigarette and tried to take a puff before I figured it out. Man, it smelled bad. That was back when Ashley didn't mind me smoking. Anyway, at that age, especially when you've been working at it a while, you always think, hey, maybe tonight's the night. We went to a pretty conservative church, and Ashley wasn't Mother Theresa, but she took her time. It was the kind of night where I wasn't even thinking about it, though. We'd had a couple of glasses of wine and it just felt nice to be with her out there, waiting on some shooting stars. We started kissing and just kept going this time. Neither of us made any decisions on our own, we just progressed together entirely connected the entire time without even speaking. And it was nice. It was really nice. I don't remember any shooting stars but I remember being on that blanket with her in July and how warm she was and how even though it was almost too dark to see her how beautiful she was and knowing that that moment was going to be important to me, maybe forever. And I suppose the reason I keep

thinking about it is because I wonder if that's the way she feels about the first time with the band director.

So I've been going to all of the shows, for the entire three week run. I've seen every show since opening night, except a couple of the school day matinees. Since I've had to leave Ellie with my parents for all these shows, they know I've been going and I'm sure they know something is wrong. My mother has probed, but I just gushed about how great and how fulfilling it was to see Ashley doing something she's really good at. I've told Ashley I'm coming again once or twice, but for the most part I don't think she knows. I wait until right before curtains to buy a ticket and slip in. The ticket sellers and ushers are geriatric volunteers so they're almost always different. I sit way in the back, in the darkest part of the theatre.

I think I needed to see Ashley's deception over and over again to understand and accept it. I know I have no real proof, but I'm confident I'm right. People don't usually have connections like that, especially in theatre of this quality. The glow in both their eyes in the scene where the prince seduces her! I've watched it so many times I can see it in my sleep. And, really the baker's wife loves the baker. In a moment of weakness and anger she falls prey to the seductive power of a fairy prince. It's a fling, it doesn't really mean anything. But the way she looks at the prince in that scene. She never looks at the baker like that. Never in the play. It's because Ashley isn't the baker's wife in that scene. She's Ashley.

I could tell you so many things about the subtle differences between each performance. The young girl playing Little Red Riding Hood tried to do a couple of shows without her glasses, but you could tell she struggled to see where she was going, and the director maybe told her to start wearing them again. The boy playing the narrator came down with the flu halfway through the run, and his singing suffered, but he seems like he's returning to full strength now. Though it

always seemed that all of them were about a half step flat, they got much better at following the pianist as they sang. At first they could be as much as several beats behind or ahead of the orchestra. As the run went on, the actors got more comfortable navigating their way to the top of the rickety multi-level set. I'm an experienced contractor, but Ashley never mentioned they might need help with the set. I don't know if the set designer was proud or if Ashley wanted to keep me separate from her fairy tale.

As I sat in the audience for hour after hour of the Honeysuckle Playhouse production of *Into the Woods*, I sometimes distracted myself from what I was really there for, and I wondered where the money came from for such a thing. The director and the set designer and the costume designer and light designer and the musical director must get paid a little something. All of the costumes, all of the lumber for the set, the props, renting the venue from the county—it must cost a fortune. For half full audiences to watch some grownups pretend to be on Broadway? The Memphis school district has something like a 100 million dollar deficit. The Mississippi Delta has the poverty and healthcare of a third world country. Do we really need to see *Into the Woods* every three years for the rest of time? Is that what's important?

There's a song in the play called "Your Fault" where everyone blames everyone else for all the tragedy that is falling on everyone's heads in the middle of the second act. Ashley's character is dead at this point. I thought a lot about whose fault any of what happened was as I sat through all eighteen performances. By the time you start thinking about blame, it's really already too late. It doesn't make you feel any better to be blameless, even if you are. I don't know if I was blameless or not, but I felt a strong need to be heard. I felt a bubbling desire to have a moment of my own on stage.

At the last show, as the opening number started up, I heard again all the characters wishing for different lives. They all get what they want by the end of the first act, and then they all wish for more by the second act's start. As the last song of the show ended, I realized that I wasn't going to be able to stay in my seat. The ache living in the pit of my stomach led to thick beads of sweat popping out on my back. I could feel them sliding down towards my belted waist. After the house went dark and the curtain closed, I started moving towards the lip of the stage. The curtains reopened, and as the lights came up I climbed onto the apron, in front of the line of actors preparing to take their bow.

"Everyone, can I have your attention for just a moment?" I said. "I have something to say. I have something I really need to say." No one moved in the entire theatre. From the stage, I could see musicians in the pit below me, and they all stared intently at the pianist who conducted them.

"Let's give all of these actors a hand," I said. "Wasn't it a breathtaking, life-changing, almost, performance?" No one clapped.

"What I wanted to say," I said. "What I wanted to remind you, is that sometimes the things you are enjoying have consequences for people that you don't even know. Weren't the baker's wife and the Prince convincing?"

Ushers started down the long aisles towards the stage.

"Well, the baker's wife is my wife, Ashley Conner." I turned around and smiled at her. "Isn't that right, Ashley?"

Ashley ran off stage-right into the bowels of backstage. The Prince followed her.

"The baker's wife and the prince are sleeping together," I said. "The baker's wife, my wife, is sleeping with the prince. He has a wife of his own. I think his father is an Elder in the

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. It's adultery. That's the type of people we are watching. At what cost do we watch these plays? At what cost?"

Then the orchestra started playing the music from the prologue loud and fast. I didn't have a microphone, but I continued, trying to be heard over the bright trumpets, the ringing timpanis. The ushers made their way onstage and escorted me outside. They said they were going to call the police, but I just got in the car and drove off. I picked up Ellie and I've been sitting in the living room since, waiting for her to come home.

## II. Deacon Blues

I was sitting on the couch in the den when my daughter Christie came in, her eyes all red, and sat down next to me.

“Oh, Daddy,” she said. Then she started sobbing with her head in her hands. Her tears scared me. She’s fifteen and hadn’t been interested in sharing much of anything with me for a couple of years. We fight about cell phone bills and her curfew a lot. Usually when she’s crying it’s because I’ve told her she needs to take a skimpy shirt back to the mall. When she needs someone to talk to, she talks to her mother.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Don’t cry. It’s okay. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Daddy, I’ve been praying with Bethany and I’ve been trying to keep it a secret—she wanted me to keep it a secret—but I just can’t.”

“What is it?” I said. “You can tell me. I can help.” Bethany is her best friend, but she’s a little fast. Her parents aren’t very involved. I wondered if she might be pregnant.

She cried harder and started to try to talk, but her words were garbled and slurry.

“B-b-b-brother Billy,” she said. Brother Billy is a youth minister at the church where I am the music minister. For a terrible moment I thought Billy might have impregnated Bethany; she was living with him to finish out the school year because her parents had moved away. Billy had a young daughter who adored Bethany, so he and his wife were happy to have her live with them until the school year was out.

“Christie,” I said. “You’ve got to calm down. What did Billy do? You have to tell me.” She took a few breaths and rubbed her nose. She sniffled and pushed her dark brown hair behind her ears.

“Brother Billy, he’s been looking at bad videos on the internet. Nasty videos. Nasty videos of people having sex.” She looked at me as if asking a question and started crying again.

“Why would he do that?” she said.

She looked as young as she was, and I wondered how long she would continue to not understand how a private sin could take hold of an entire life and even bleed over into a man’s ability to provide.

The next day after color guard practice I had her bring Bethany over. The girls sat in t-shirts and gym shorts on tall stools behind the breakfast bar. Each took furtive pulls from glass bottles of cream soda. Tortilla chips and salsa sat untouched on an ancient porcelain chip and dip my wife and I received as a wedding present. I couldn’t blame the girls for not eating—I didn’t feel well myself, having no experience speaking with young people about the subject at hand—this was usually Billy’s territory.

“It’s good that you brought this to me,” I began.

“Christie kind of made that decision on her own,” said Bethany.

“I’m sorry,” Christie said, her voice shaking. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“You didn’t have to DO anything,” Bethany said.

“Girls,” I said. “I know you’re both upset, but you’re not in trouble. You did the right thing, and everything is going to be alright.”

“What are you going to do to him?” Bethany said.

“Why don’t you tell me how this all happened.”

Bethany pulled her sandy hair out of a ponytail and shook it over the front of her face, covering her eyes.

“It was really an accident,” she said.



“Just start from the beginning.”

“I spilled Coke on my laptop a couple of weeks ago. I haven’t been able to get it fixed yet, I don’t know if it can be fixed. So Billy let me start using his sometimes. When I want to look at Facebook and stuff?”

“Ok.”

“So, he has it set up where there’s a login for him and a login for me and Annabelle, but I guess he forgot to sign out of his most of the time, and, well, he doesn’t have all the child blocks on his side so I would never log out. And then—”

Bethany flipped her hair back behind her head. She noticed how intently both Christie and I were watching her but continued.

“So I noticed some weird searches coming up in the Google bar at the top of the screen. There were all kinds of different searches for all kinds of porn videos. I wasn’t really sure what it was so I watched some of one and it was really bad. People having sex—“

“I didn’t watch anything,” Christie said.

“And I only watched for like one minute,” Bethany said. “I just closed out the window and closed out the screen. But I know it wasn’t Annabelle and I know it wasn’t me. I just never thought Brother Billy would watch stuff like that.”

“Does Billy know?” I said.

“No, I don’t think so,” Bethany said.

“Ok. I’m going to figure this out,” I said. “It’s very important that you don’t tell anybody else about this, until I’m able to talk with Billy.”

“You’re going to tell him?” Bethany said. She began to cry.

“This is not your fault,” I said. “This is not your fault at all.”

Christie began to cry too.

“Girls, you did the right thing. We’re going to get Billy some help. He needs some help, and now he’s going to get it.”

I gave the girls twenty dollars and sent them to the movies; Christie just got her intermediate license. After they left I wrote a note for my wife and left it on the counter. I told her I was going on a drive.

Karen and I have been married twenty-five years. I was at Mississippi State when we first met, but I dropped out and started catfish farming when we got engaged. I wanted to buy her a ring, and I was drinking too much to get anything out of class anyway. Several boys I grew up with went into catfish farming and I got on at my buddy Jack’s operation. For the first ten years of our marriage I was out at the pond early almost every day for the morning feeding, and on a barstool by late afternoon. Karen put up with it until my second child, Christie, was born. A couple months after Karen got back from the hospital she set me down and told me to look in the refrigerator. The twenty-four pack of Bud Light that always took up the bottom hydrator was gone.

“Look in the cabinet,” she said. I knew which one she meant. The Evan Williams I constantly replaced was gone from the cabinet next to the refrigerator.

“If you’re gonna drink your paycheck away, it don’t matter if I’m working too,” she said. “I don’t teach nine hours a day to come home to you drunk on the couch, if you’re home at all. We got two kids now. And Nick watches everything you do. He wants to be just like you. I’m gonna take them with me if you don’t stop drinking. Then you won’t be able to drink all your money away because you’ll be sending child support. I love you, Michael, but I need you to stop this.”

I stayed with a buddy for the next three days, drinking myself blind every night, but after that I stopped and came back home. I loved Karen. I loved Nick. I loved Christie. Why was I living like George Jones? Some buddies and I used to laugh about the story where Tammy took away George's car keys to keep him from getting down to the liquor store, so George just rode his lawn mower eight miles to town and Tammy found him drunk on the floor in the bathroom just like normal. We thought it was a pretty funny story.

I think part of it was I was tired of wading and counting a bunch of slimy scaleless bottom feeders every day—smelling the catfish on me even on Sunday at church. Maybe I hated looking at the double wide we only were able to pay off after Karen's daddy died. Even paid for, I didn't want to live in it. It wasn't any good seeing Nick run around wearing his cousin's old clothes. Maybe that had something to do with all the drinking. Maybe we all just have some kind of vice we can't let get too much of a hold on us.

A church a couple miles away needed a piano player and I started making extra money that way until I could afford to go to seminary in New Orleans. I took Karen and the kids down there and everything has been a lot better since then. New Orleans is a funny town to learn about how to be a preacher, and sometimes I disappeared into it, but I didn't have much trouble stopping my drinking. I couldn't lose Karen and the kids, and I was working towards something now. Once I got done with the Seminary I started making pretty good money doing music for churches.

But, every now and then, I feel the old itch and go buy some bourbon. I drive north out of the suburbs into Memphis and then northeast to Jackson, Tennessee. Being Baptist, I drive out where I don't know anybody. The drive is a good way to unwind for it too. When I tell Karen I'm going on a ride, she knows that I'm going to drink that night, and she lets me. There's a bar

in Jackson right next to a Motel 6 I found one weekend I was out there doing music for a revival. I drink as much as I need to and then pass out at the motel. I've never done it more than a night at a time, and I never felt like I needed it as bad as that day Bethany told me about Billy.

About half an hour into the drive I called my son. He had a few wild years himself, but he met a girl in college and is in seminary school now. His wife picked up the phone and then gave it to Nick. I told him the story and asked what he thought.

"Well," he said. "That's bad. I never would have thought that from Billy." Billy was the youth minister for a couple of years before Nick went to college.

"Also, I guess people finding something like this out never really occurred to me. Do any of the deacons know?" he said.

"As far as I know, Bethany just told me and your sister."

"Make sure they don't tell anybody," he said.

"They won't tell anybody."

"And he wasn't doing this at work?"

"I don't think so. It was on his personal laptop."

"Hmm," Nick said. "This next question—"

"Go ahead," I said.

"Well, Nick said, "what kind of porn was it?"

"I don't see why that would matter," I said. "Goodness, Nick."

"No, I definitely think it matters. Was it like, barely legal stuff, or something weird like torture porn or BDSM? On, no, it wasn't gay porn, was it?"

"Nick, how much do you watch this stuff?"

“C’mon Dad, it’s 2013. I’m aware of it. All I’m saying is, some of these sub categories could have some bad connotations. Considering he works with kids?”

“I see what you mean,” I said. “This complicates things.”

“Are you gonna tell Brother John?”

“I don’t want to,” I said. “But I don’t think I have much choice.”

“I guess you do,” he said. “I’m really sorry to hear about this.”

“It’s a bad thing,” I said.

“Dad,” he said, “are you in the truck?”

“Yeah.”

“You going to Jackson?”

“Yeah.

“Well, take it easy,” he said.

“Don’t worry about me,” I told him. “I’ll call you when this mess gets figured out.”

I woke up, as I have several times before, in a darkened motel room. I looked to the bedside table and saw a half empty plastic cup and fifth of whiskey two-thirds gone. The red eyes of the alarm clock read 7:48. My own eyes were pretty red in the motel mirror. I left the bottle on the table and hurried out to the truck. My stomach was upset and my head hurt. I bought some coffee at McDonald’s and set out towards I-40, past the tired, empty strip-malls and the same row of fast food restaurants I’d see at every exit in the hour and a half between here and home. I considered what I had done the night before. It was a private, shameful scene, but unlike Billy’s transgression, it was mostly untraceable. I wondered if this mattered. I wondered what

this meant. I wondered if the fallout would be any less severe. In the end both vices amount to a lack of self-control.

When I made it home, my wife was already gone to work. Usually we have breakfast with Christie before she goes to school, but I'd missed my chance for that. After a quick shower I pulled on a polo and some khakis. I was swamped at church. I had a new drum set to put together and I needed to transpose some scores for orchestra rehearsal that night. Most of the adults in the orchestra can transpose themselves, but I've got a couple of high school kids that haven't mastered it yet. Also, I had choir rehearsal that night before the service so I read over some new music for that. As I was finishing making some copies for our piano player, Pastor John came up behind me and clapped me on the back. I jumped and dropped a stack of sheet music.

"Little gun-shy, Michael?" he said. He let out a booming laugh and helped me pick up the music. John isn't a short man, but he seems small when he isn't behind a pulpit. He's pushing sixty-five with not much hair left and is soft spoken in conversation. He appreciates a good joke though, provided it's clean, and his laugh can be heard through the halls of the church if he's amused. If he's not amused, you know it.

"You about ready?" he asked.

John, Billy and I usually get lunch at a pizza place in a strip mall up the street on Wednesdays. I had planned on waiting to tell John in the afternoon, but Billy didn't make it to lunch that day.

We sat across from each other in a vinyl booth beneath a roughly painted picture of Robert Johnson. The pizza place, besides painting of blues icons was almost sterile—plain white tile, light-blue vinyl booths, big floor to ceiling plate glass windows, the entire establishment a large square split between the dining room and the kitchen—but the pizza was good. John asked

me questions about a music special coming up for a convocation honoring graduating youth. Our pizza arrived, and we prayed before John dug in.

“Only time we get anchovies is when Billy is busy on Wednesday,” John said, after a pause. Usually I loved anchovies, but I hadn’t been able to eat more than a couple of bites of my first slice.

“Where is Billy?” I said.

“He’s got that new series on purity for the youth group starting tonight. Said he wanted to finish working on his talk.”

“Purity?”

“Purity of the heart, body, mind, and soul. Couldn’t come at a better time. The bulk of the youth group is getting to that age. You remember that age.” John smiled at me.

“Right, right,” I said. I remembered Billy mentioning something about the series.

“John, Christie told me something a couple of days ago.”

John smiled. “You gonna tell me what’s wrong now?” he said. “You’ve seemed strange all day.”

“It’s not good, John,” I said. “Bethany found some pretty bad stuff on Billy’s laptop. She told Christie, and Christie told me.”

John’s face went tight. He looked down at the half-eaten slice of pizza on his plate. He finished it and stared out the window. After wiping his mouth with a napkin he said, “Facebook is getting everybody in trouble these days. You wouldn’t believe how many couples I’ve counseled about infidelity because of that website. How bad is it? Has he acted on anything? Is it someone in the church?”

“What?” I said. “No. No, it’s not that. It’s pornography. He’s been looking up lots of pornographic videos.”

“Oh,” he said. His eyes widened. “With Bethany?”

“No, of course not. She just found the history on his computer.”

“Oh,” he said again. He sucked air through his teeth. “That’s still bad, but this isn’t all that uncommon. I’ve heard about this problem at conferences. Officially the convention has a zero tolerance policy, but I don’t know if we can handle the fallout right now.”

Recently in addition to a secretary being very publicly fired for minor embezzlement, the latest financial report to the congregation showed that we were struggling with our payments for the loan we took out to expand the church.

“There’s that,” I said.

“I’d hate to lose Billy.” John’s face lost its edge. “I remember what a hard time him and Jane had after those miscarriages. I prayed with him every morning and every afternoon. And then my daughter, with her miscarriage last year. He was there for me.”

“Everybody makes mistakes,” I said.

“We can figure this out,” John said. “Let me think about it. Let me pray about it.”

That was all we said about it at lunch. John said he’d talk to me before he approached Billy.

John’s reaction differed from what I initially expected, but I wasn’t completely shocked. Tithing had been going poorly, despite some not so subtle sermons recently. There’s a church smack dab in the middle of the drive from both my house and John’s house to our church where you can actually see the chains the bank draped through the door handles after they stopped making their mortgage. We’re not close to that, but it’s a constant reminder. But it isn’t just



money. John believes in forgiveness. I've seen it. Billy and I are some of his only confidants, so I hear about the troubles of a lot of the couples he counsels. I've been at two other churches. His couples tend to stay together. Still, I felt something had to be done, this had to be addressed somehow.

I couldn't sleep that night. I talked it over with Karen—she told me I'd done the right thing—but all I could think about was Billy's daughter. Nine years old. All of her friends were in the youth group. Billy had a degree from a bible college in north Mississippi. If we didn't work everything out, what were they going to do? Where else could he make sixty thousand a year? He had his own mortgage to worry about. I wanted a drink, but I didn't have anything in the house. It was too late for a liquor store, and I couldn't go anyway. You've heard the joke about the Baptist and the Catholic in the liquor store. Forget about going to a bar. But it wasn't really a joke, was it? There's my transgression next to his—though who am I lying to? I'm just playing music for everyone. I don't even preach. I tossed and turned and tried to pray, but I found no relief. Then the sun came up.

I arose and started making breakfast. Usually Karen just scrambles some eggs and fries some bacon, but since I woke so early, I decided to whip up some omelets. I fried some bacon crispy and chopped it up small. In the fridge I found a leftover half of red onion and a green bell pepper. I sautéed them in the bacon grease and put them to the side. Then I cracked some eggs in a bowl, beat them up, added a little cream, and seasoned them. As I started pouring the first batch of eggs in the pan, Christie trudged into the kitchen draped in a big disciple now t-shirt and gym shorts, her face lined with sleep. She sat down at the kitchen table and I poured her a glass of orange juice before moving back to the pan to add the bacon, peppers, onions, and cheese.

"How'd you sleep?" I said.

“I had nightmares. A lady in a purple jacket was sitting at the foot of my bed. And she wouldn’t leave.” She’d had this dream as a little girl, but then the lady in the jacket was an angel.

“That one again? I’m sorry, Christiebell.” I shook the pan a little bit, separating the edges of the omelet from the pan with a spatula.

“Daddy,” she said, “what’s going to happen to Brother Billy?”

“I don’t know, sweetie. Brother John and I are figuring that out. We want him to get better. To get right.” I folded the omelet. “What’s important right now is that you and Bethany not gossip. We need to decide what we’re going to do without a big hullabaloo.”

“I wouldn’t tell anybody,” she said.

“What about Bethany?”

Christie shook her head. “You saw how she was. She’s worried about Brother Billy too.”

“She should be. Y’all both pray for him. He needs it right now.” I slid the omelet out of the pan and onto a plate and put it in front of my daughter. I returned to the counter and cracked three more eggs.

“Daddy?” Christie said.

“Yes, sweetie.”

“Have you ever looked at that kind of stuff?”

“What?” I said. I dropped the fork I was using to beat the eggs on the counter.

“Like—” Christie stopped. “Like the videos Brother Billy was watching.” Her expression was sullen, her mouth drawn and her eyebrows raised—an expression I remember her mother making when I arrived home later than I said I would.

“Well, I—”

I hadn't ever gotten into that kind of thing on the Internet—I barely check my email—but there have been times, when the children and the wife are in bed, that I've watched late night television on HBO or Cinemax.

“No, Christie, I haven't. I don't even know where you find those videos.”

“It doesn't seem to be that hard,” Christie said.

“I suppose not.” Christie didn't break her gaze. “You know, Christie, these things are complicated.”

“What's complicated?”

“I mean, you know it's important to keep things special. To keep things for whoever you choose to get married to. I know you know that.”

“Sure, Daddy. I wear my True Love Waits ring every day. Like a wedding ring.”

“Right, and it's all about making sure you have a special connection with whoever you get married to. Something only you and him will have.”

“Yeah, yeah, Dad. I know.”

I could tell I was losing her. I was getting too close to awkward territory.

“Situations like this have a lot to do with context. With Billy's position.”

“Do you mean it's okay to watch that stuff if you're not a preacher?”

“I don't—I—I guess what I'm trying to say—” I returned to the eggs. “Do you remember Romans 3:23?”

“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”

“I guess just keep that in mind, sweetie. Everybody makes mistakes.”

The eggs sizzled violently as I poured them into the skillet. I'd left it over heat unwatched too long.

Usually walking into the church calmed me down. Even though our sanctuary (for now) is a multi-purpose room with lines painted on the floor for basketball, the largeness and quiet of the space always pleased me. Not this day. This day, I knew, John would have made his decision about Billy. I sat at the shiny grand piano up on the stage and played a few hymns, but I kept hitting the wrong keys. I thought about my father. He was the only man who knew how to play piano in Sunflower, Mississippi. All the churches had an old lady who could plunk out some chords, but when my father played, the church would pack out. He played the Baptist church most regularly, but other churches would pay him to come play for special services sometimes. After every service he played *Stand By Me*. He said it was inspired by the psalms. He never listened to sermons, though. He'd slip out and back in just in time for the invitation. I played the old progression a couple of times before John walked up on the stage.

"It sounds so much louder when the church is empty," he said.

"I've always liked it."

"I've decided what I'm going to do."

"Oh?"

"We'll get him some help. Some counseling. We don't need to involve anyone else."

"The deacons?"

"What the deacons don't know won't hurt them."

"When are you going to talk to him?"

"This afternoon. I'd like you to be there."

I couldn't imagine anything I'd rather not do. I golf with Billy every Friday. His daughter and Bethany sleep over with Christie a couple times a week. Our wives are in a ladies choral

group together. He baptized Christie. And now I was to stand in judgment of him? Billy knows about my problem. We were in a prayer group together, and I confided in him, at a particularly trying time. He hadn't been very worried about it. He didn't grow up Baptist. He told me he didn't mind a few beers over a football game, but he urged me to refrain if it kept me from the church and from my family.

I know he never told anyone about my drinking, but I felt different about his situation the more I thought about it. One, I'd never gotten caught. I know, as a man who lives off church tithes that shouldn't make a difference to me, but it did. Who was I hurting? Who looked to me as an example? Billy told the kids to refrain from temptation every week. I direct the orchestra. I didn't want to hurt him, but it worried me. That young girl lived in his house. My daughter was over there all the time. I trusted Billy, but I worried about how far temptation could go. I didn't feel right being there for a confrontation, but I wasn't sure if John could do it alone.

John's office is small but neat. Tall bookcases filled with theology texts dominate the walls. His diploma hangs behind his desk, next to the only window. Pictures of his wife and children and grandchildren sit on his desk and in front of the rows of books on the shelves. I sat in a wingback chair next to the desk John sat behind. When Billy came in, John instructed him to take a seat. He made a joke about coming before the senior council. Billy is in his thirties— younger than me and much younger than John. He has bush brown hair and a neatly manicured goatee that's beginning to show gray flecks. He traces the goatee with his thumb and forefinger when he's nervous and he started doing that as he sat, waiting for John to begin.

John told him what Bethany told Christie and me. Billy smiled and raised his eyebrows. He looked at John and then at me and then back at John, his lips frozen in a smile curled over his teeth.

“She found what?” he said. He continued to smile.

“She found a variety of searches for pornographic videos. Also, your browser showed a history of several different pornographic video sites that had been visited regularly. On your user id. On your laptop.”

“That’s impossible,” Billy said. “That girl is always drawing attention to herself. Having her at the house has really been more than Jane and I bargained for. Do you think, maybe, Bethany could have—”

“Surely,” John said, “you’re not blaming the girl.” Something in John’s tone hit Billy.

“You know, I did do a little research about pornography,” Billy said. He spoke quickly. “For this purity series I’ve got going for the youth. To warn them of the dangers. Physical disorders, mental problems, more likely to commit a sexual crime. Rots the brain. Poisons the heart. Maybe Bethany saw some of that history and just got a little mixed up?”

I said, “Billy, we’re not here to put you on trial. We just need to talk about this.”

“The first night of the purity series went great, by the way,” Billy said. He gazed over John’s shoulders. “I put the word out on the Youth Facebook group and a lot of the kids brought their friends. Friends that don’t have church homes. Seven kids got saved! We got a lot of the kids to commit their hearts and minds to purity. Next Wednesday I’m going to talk about purity rings.”

“Billy,” John said.

“Yeah, we had more kids there last night than we’ve had in a long time. Doing good work,” he laughed and looked down at the floor.

“Billy,” John said. “We’re your friends.” Billy put his face in his hands and began to cry softly. John walked around his desk and put his hands on Billy’s shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” Billy said, his face still in his hands. “It started out the way I said.” He looked up at me and rubbed his nose. Some snot had dribbled into his goatee. I handed him a box of tissues from the desk. “It started out with me doing research for this series. But you wouldn’t believe the smut that comes up on your screen when you type in pornography. I was curious and I was tempted and I gave into temptation. Oh, I gave into temptation.” He put his face back in his hands. John still stood behind him, stoic, his hand still on his shoulders.

“This is serious, Billy,” he said. “I’m not going to pretend like it isn’t. We’re all under a microscope. It can be hard under the lens, with scrutiny on you at all times. It’s hard for me and Michael, too. Sometimes the glare gets warm, but we’ve got to trudge on and be an example. You especially. So many of these young people look to you for guidance. You’ve got to be an example of spiritual strength for them. This is an impressionable time. If the man that leads them to Christ falls to temptation, they might question their faith at this very important time. A youth’s conviction wavers, and if it fails, it might never come back. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir,” Billy said. He blew his nose and smoothed his goatee. John returned to his desk. “Could we pray for a while? I need to make this right.” We scooted closer together and formed a circle of linked hands. Sometimes John spoke out loud, sometimes Billy did, but we were mostly silent for almost forty minutes.

I never hear anything when we have these long prayers. We have them often, especially John and Billy and me. I grew up in the church, and the music and routine makes me feel in place, but I don’t hear the things others seem to. My idea of God is much fuzzier, much less clear, than the being John talks about on Sunday. I like the prayers, though, even the long ones. The people around me seem to get a lot out of it, and somehow that makes me feel better as well.

“I feel better already,” Billy said, when we concluded our prayers. “I’ve been needing to get that off my chest.”

“I feel better, too,” John said. “Michael and I have talked this over. We think you need to see a therapist. I found one in town that specializes in this kind of thing. He’s a faith based marriage counselor. I don’t know if your wife knows about this, but I think you two need to talk about it. I want you to take a week off. I’ll make your excuses. Get right with your wife, start the counseling, and if all goes well, we can put this all behind us.”

Billy’s face had just begun to get some color back, but all the blood drained out when John said wife. He said, “Yes, I suppose that’s best. I’ll have to talk to Jane. Yes, I suppose that’s best.” Billy stood up, so John and I did too. He gave us both big hugs and walked towards the door. Before he exited he stopped and turned around. “If I need to talk,” he said, “I’ll call one of you. Thank you.”

After he left John said, “He disappointed me at first, but I’m pleased with how that went.”

“You were more than generous,” I said. “He seemed truly remorseful.”

“What are we without mercy?” John said.

Billy called me that night. He told me not to second guess telling John what Bethany told my daughter. He thanked me. He said he couldn’t have stopped by himself.

The next day was Friday, and by 1 p.m. I had finished all the preparations for the services Sunday. Typically Billy and I head out early and play nine holes of golf Friday afternoons. I drove to the golf course alone and hit a couple of buckets of balls on the range. My iron play is pretty good, but I’m trying to improve my drive. It’s a long way from PBR and shots of whiskey at the tavern after a long day of counting catfish.



As I was setting up to hit my last ball, I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. I held my club in my left hand pulled out my phone. It was John.

“Michael,” he said. His voice wavered. “I don’t know how to tell you this. The deacons had a vote this morning at their prayer meeting. Billy’s out. Ben Thrush called him right after the meeting.”

Ben Thrush is the chairman of the deacons. From what John gathered, Bethany told most of the kids in her biology class about Billy’s Internet problems the day before. Around the time we were talking with Billy, our plans were rendered useless. Two of the children in the class are in the youth group at church. One of the girls is Ben’s granddaughter. The vote had been almost unanimous.

When I got home, I thought about calling Billy, but I couldn’t work up the nerve. There was nothing I could have done about what Bethany told people but I couldn’t push away feelings of culpability. I should have stressed the importance of the matter to Bethany more. Maybe Christie told Bethany I planned to talk to John. Maybe that knowledge made Bethany feel the cat was out of the bag. I began writing a note to Karen, telling her I was going on another drive. She would be worried and angry. I’d never taken a drive twice in one week. After I finished the note I read it and threw it in the garbage. The distance between Jackson and me, from a drink and me, was too far. I’d chance the liquor store in town.

Before I could pull out of the driveway the school bus stopped in front of my house. Christie ran down the stairs and over to the window of my truck. She was in tears. I opened the door and put my arms around her.

“Christie,” I said. “Why didn’t you drive your car home?”

“The manual says you’re not supposed to drive when you’re emotional,” she said. “Oh, Daddy, I’m so sorry I told on Brother Billy. I’m so sorry.” She cried into my chest.

“How did you—”

“Everybody knows,” she said. “I’ve been getting text messages all day.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry I said anything. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

I held my daughter in my arms and tried to comfort her as best I could. When she calmed down, I asked her if I could take her to get frozen yogurt.

“I don’t think I want to go with you right now, Dad. I’m sorry. Maybe I could go with Bethany.”

“But your car—” I said.

“Oh,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter. Take mine. I don’t need to go anywhere.”

I watched her drive off, small behind the truck’s big steering wheel, but also very precise and careful with all the stops and turns.

### III. Bedfellows

I've got to find a different place to live, a different place to sleep. Being lovesick all the time is one thing, but I think I might just be sick. I sleep next to her every night. My head aches so bad I think my hair is going to fall out. Sometimes my belly feels so tight I worry my something's burst in there. She's there when I wake up, when I fall asleep. I imagine the nape of her neck when I'm driving to work. I see the little love handles above her waist when I stock shelves. I grind my teeth more than I don't.

I didn't plan on sharing my bed with a single mother of an infant. I didn't plan to sleep with a woman who didn't want me there. I didn't plan on letting it affect me. But—I don't think there was much I could do about it. Something crazy happens after a while when you share a bed with someone. I can't prove it, but it's true. I think it's like breaking bread, like the last supper, the disciples in the bible. Sharing a table makes you brothers in some way. I don't know what sharing a bed with her has made me.

When I first moved in with Jesús and his little shih tzu, I had a lot more money. Expenses were very low, because originally Jesús didn't charge me any rent—his dad was covering it. Jesús is a kind of remittance man. His dad pays him to keep a low profile. His family owns Mexican joints all over North Mississippi, but the don't like seeing Jesús around because of the way he dresses. Jesús likes halter-tops and tight jeans—he wears a lot of makeup. Before he got really heavy into glitter, we worked in a warehouse together. That's where I met him. I drove a forklift and Jesús unloaded trucks. I was needing a place to stay because I had recently been evicted after my mom went off to rehab again. I send her a little cash so it was nice when Jesús explained he was in the process of getting this two bedroom apartment from his father. His dad would cover the rent as long as he stayed away from the restaurants.

After a couple months Jesús and I resigned from the warehouse. I had a little bit saved up and we drank a lot. Those early days come back pretty hazy—I mean we were doing a lot of drinking. The apartments are right next to the rink where the local minor league hockey team plays, and those guys throw some parties when they win. I saw Amber for the first time at one of these parties.

The Rivermen—that was the local team—had beaten the Indianapolis Racers in a shoot-out, so there was an air of carnal victory even more urgent than usual. The goalies girlfriend brought an eight ball, and Jesús had his nose stuck to a mirror all night. I had received some bad news from mom that morning, so I decided not to drink. I have brief periods of sobriety when I consider the implications of my family history. They never last long.

Because I was sober I remember very clearly what Amber looked like that first night I saw her. She stood in the corner, talking to Jesús. He toned down the makeup for the hockey parties, though despite the display of masculinity the players put up, he seldom went home alone in those early days. One of older hockey players was complaining to me about child support and I saw her across the room. I found her completely unremarkable. Her allure seemed too obvious to me. Certain features caught my eye, but only because they were too exposed or too harsh. She drank some kind of light beer, and I remember thinking, by the way she rested her hand upon her hip, that I could see how she would age. Some women you can tell where they will broaden and what will wrinkle. Some women have an allure that is particularly fleeting.

The gravy train with Jesús ended fairly abruptly. He started saving up for one of those operations and promptly began charging me rent. Then he started looking for other roommates. Ever since I met Jesús he usually did a little dealing on the side, and that's where we met our first roommate. Russ managed one of those vitamin/health food stores in strip malls, usually

between lower-end grocery stores and home furnishing places. I had been working odd jobs to pay my share of the rent, and Russ got me on at the health food store.

Russ is the kind of guy who'll confess how much he still misses his ex-girlfriend just before breaking a guy's jaw for bumping into him at the bar, so I was initially skeptical about working for him, but I needed the money.

On my first day he showed me some sheets for inventory, some slips for delivery confirmation—really it was just paperwork.

“Now these,” Russ said, putting down a large box labeled male hormones, “these you leave to me.”

“I don't count these as inventory?” I asked, not sure what Russ meant. He crossed his arms in front of his chest, bulging his biceps even more than when they hung at his sides, where they were not quite able to hang flush.

“Memorize the item number of this box,” he said. “I take care of these.”

It wasn't two weeks before I was helping steal them as well. We just fudged the numbers. We'd say we didn't get enough in shipments. We'd write the inventories slightly off. Not enough to set off any red flags, but enough to keep Jesús with a supply to sell.

Stealing came pretty naturally to me despite some initial uneasiness. I think it helped that my boss was sort of ordering me to do it. I could compartmentalize it that way. It was just one more thing I did to get paid.

At first, Russ slept on the couch in the living room, but it got cold in the winter, and Jesús was stingy about turning on the heat. The bedrooms have better insulation, and Jesús and I have blankets and pillows. One night Jesús got Russ drunk and he ended up on Jesús' air mattress. I

could tell Jesús was at work on Russ the entire time we split a liter of tequila down between us. I'd seen him at work before. At first it seemed wrong to me, but I'd never seen anyone not go with him—and he'd never tried it on me. So that evening they retired together into Jesús's room. It's mostly empty but for Daisy's dog bed and two king-sized air mattresses stacked on top of each other. Russ didn't move back to the couch when the weather warmed up.

The day Jesús asked me how I felt about Amber moving in I was sitting at the card table in the kitchen, eating some fast food. Jesús eased his scrawny frame up on the countertop. He stared at me for a while, in his strange way, perched above me like a vulture. I tried not to smack on my burger. I got self-conscious about eating with Jesús watching the food like it was something he planned on swooping down to eat. A tomato slid down the burger and off my chin. It plopped on the table.

“Jesus, Jesús. What the fuck do you want?”

“Listen—“ He jumped off the counter and landed hard on his feet, almost stepping on a dried dog turd. “How would you feel about cheaper rent?”

“What's the catch?”

“A friend of mine needs a place to stay. Her boyfriend is moving to Indianapolis, and he doesn't want her to come.”

“Why should I mind?” I said. “The couch looks like it's going to stay open.” I almost winked but decided against it.

Jesús rubbed his socked feet on the pocked, dirty linoleum. He pushed pieces of dried dog shit into a pile, using his foot as a broom.

“Daisy is messy,” he said to himself. He shook his head. “No, that's not what I mean. She just had a baby. She should have a bed.”

I told him the rent better be a hell of a lot cheaper if I was being demoted to sleeping on the couch. Remember who fudges the numbers at the store, I reminded him. He picked up the piles of dog shit with his bare hands and washed them down the garbage disposal. He didn't want to take out the trash, I guess. The whole place smelled like dog shit anyway.

"I told her the situation," Jesús said. "She doesn't care about sharing the bed with you.

"Shit," I said, "I don't know." But he talked me into it, like he always does.

I don't know what's been happening to me since then. At first I slept on the couch—it was too weird to share the bed with her. Then, some nights, she'd be out so late I'd go to bed. I'd fall asleep alone and wake to her feeding the baby. That's the only furniture she brought—a little crib. I helped build it and put it in front of bookcase, filled with books I'd never read.

Engineering books from my first year of college. Books about welding and carpentry and whatever get rich quick scheme I was thinking of at the time.

On the first night I dared to sleep in the bed, she shook me awake when she got home.

"Hey," she said, "hey." She smelled like cigarettes and watermelon vodka. "Wake up."

"Oh," I said. I spat out my retainer, wiping the spit on my gym shorts. "It's for my teeth. I'm sorry. I'll go back on the—"

"No, no," she said.

My eyes focused. She wore a low cut, form fitting tank top. Her belly looked rounder than I remembered. It looked good on her.

"I just want to tell you the ground rules here."

"It's really late," I said.

"Don't touch me," she said.

"I'm not touching you."

“When I’m asleep, I mean. This is the first rule. I don’t want you to touch me. I also don’t want us to breathe on each other, so I don’t want to sleep face to face. Oh, and don’t watch me while I breastfeed.” She looked over at the baby she had just laid in the crib. “Can you manage that?”

“Sure,” I said. “Sure.” I rolled over and went back to sleep.

When we started sharing the bed, things changed for me. After even a few nights she looked different to me. She’s not a particularly beautiful woman. She’s not a particularly clean woman. She doesn’t wash off her makeup. At first I was laundering the sheets more than I should have, to try to keep off the makeup stains. I stopped because I like the musk she leaves. The sheets have been on for months now. She has dark, heavy eyebrows that almost meet, her nose is cruel, almost jagged, as if cut from stone. But her hygiene, her harshness—it doesn’t bother me. Somehow I’m filled up and warmed by it. I want to bathe her. I want to scrub the mascara off her eyes. I want to suck the milk from her swollen nipples.

It was so easy to end up here. I just slid right into it. My day revolves around waiting for her to feed a baby—it’s the only thing I look forward to. What did I used to look forward to? What did I imagine I’d be doing at twenty five? What’s made me like this? I don’t know. Maybe it’s primal or some shit. She doesn’t cover herself at all when she feeds the baby. She just expects me not to look, but I *stare*. She’s too dazed when she wakes up to notices. She picks up the baby and lies back in bed, propped against the headboard, usually falling asleep as the baby does what I wish I could.

The health store fired Russ. They couldn’t prove anything, but they knew. For some reason they didn’t suspect me at all. Now I’ve got Russ’s job, and now it’s me that has the keys. I close the place down. What an ascension in the world, to have the corporate trust of a middling



supplement store. I steal enough hormones to keep Russ supplied for personal use, but Jesús is delving into other products these days. I don't know which ones, and I don't want to. The extra money from the promotion is coming in handy. My mom calls every now and then asking for a wire. She only calls for money.

Jeusus gets impatient waiting on enough money for his operation and goes to Tunica a couple nights a week to gamble. He doesn't bring anyone with him, but he talks extensively about his foolproof system. He writes down all the bets he makes in a yellow spiral ring binder. Basically he makes a lot of sucker bets at the roulette table. He never makes any money, but I'm not going to tell him how to arrange his finances. All I want to do is make rent and hope I have wet dreams about Amber. She works at a grocery store, midday to mid evening. I don't see her but at night. By the time she's picked up the baby from her mom's she's usually about ready to conk out. This makes her rules easy to follow. She doesn't talk much anyway.

It's usually quiet with Amber gone and the two guys in their room. I've been working my way through a history of the Civil War, but I don't get to read it when Jesús is gambling—Russ gets bored. Last time Jesús went to Tunica, Russ tried to justify his sleeping situation.

"I bet you think I'm a faggot, don't you," he said. He stood across from the couch and frowned down at me. When Daisy yipped at his heels, he kicked her across the room. She gets kicked a lot when Jesús is gone.

"What are you talking about?" I said. "I don't give a fuck what you do."

"I sleep with a spic fairy. What do you think I'm talking about?" He clenched and unclenched his fists.

“Way I look at it, whatever happens in there is between you and Jesús. I don’t spend much time thinking about it.” I tried to get back to my book. Russ found a spot on the floor big enough for him to sit down without resting on dog shit stains.

“I would have moved out by now,” Russ said, “if I hadn’t been fired.”

“Tough break,” I said. I knew there was some resentment there, but I was still giving him the supplements.

“Happened kind of fast though, didn’t it?” he said.

“Kind of out of nowhere, yeah,” I said. I knew he knew I didn’t snitch on him, but he looked a little unhinged. And he always looks big.

“Nothing happens in there, you know.” Russ nodded his head backwards, towards his room.

I didn’t say anything, but the walls aren’t very thick.

“I’m starting at the Memphis Police Academy soon,” he said. His voice was defiant, but kind of desperate too. “I’ll have to move across the state line and live in Memphis when I’m done.

It was the first I’d heard of any police academy plans. He is the kind of hothead meathead who would look nice and smug dressed in blue.

Russ stared off at the wall for a while. The dog jumped on his lap and he let it stay. He rubbed the mutt on a spot on her belly until one of her back legs thumped and shook. She peed a little on the carpet and then snapped at Russ’s hand.

“It makes me feel weird though,” he said.

“What’s weird?”

“Sharing a bed and sleeping with Jesús. Sometimes I wake up and I look over and I could swear that I—“ He swallowed hard. “Never mind,” he said and retreated to the room he shared.

She moans in her sleep and it wakes me up, but I never say anything. Sometimes I move in closer and closer, facing her, breaking the rules with my lips right up to hers, close next to hers, almost touching hers but not quite. Sometimes I think she’s waking up and she’s going to put her lips on mine, but moans always start up again and I move away. Her moans are animal and low. Sometimes it seems like she’s speaking a different language in her sleep, one that I can’t decipher, but I lie awake and imagine she’s telling me what she wants me to do with her. Not just sexy things, but places she wants me to take her and gifts she’d like to have, maybe things she’d like for the kid. I like to fall asleep imagining she’s talking to me.

Last night when I got home, Jesús had a black eye and a swollen lip. He walked with a limp. A couple days a week Jesús gets food delivered from the closest of his dad’s restaurants so there were Styrofoam boxes filled with rice and beans and burritos and tacos littered around the counter and card table. He paced from the living room to the kitchen.

“Russell got a little angry last night,” Jesús said.

“It certainly looks like it.”

“We’d been drinking at the casino a while. I don’t know. Russ was losing at the roulette table. I was reassuring him, rubbing his shoulders. I guess he’d been trying to shrug me off before he started hitting me, but I didn’t know I was bothering him.”

“He beat the shit out you in the middle of the casino?” I asked.

“Security came quick, but not quick enough to stop this,” he said, pointing to his eye. “I haven’t seen him since.”

“He told me he was planning on moving out,” I said. “The police academy and all.”

Jesús laughed. “That’s just something he says. He’ll never pass a drug test. Anyway, he owes me money. A lot.”

I guess he meant drugs or supplements or something, but I didn’t care to make sure.

“Mind if I have some tacos?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said. “I don’t think Daisy got into the ones on the counter.”

I picked up one of the boxes and brought it into the living room. Jesús paced around, wincing with every step.

“Man,” I said. “Your family knows how to make a taco. Did you ever think about the family business? It’s gotta be easier than what you’re doing now. Good, straight business.”

Jesús squinted at me.

“That’s not what I meant, man. You know, like on the level.”

He shook his head. “Listen, Amber wasn’t going to say anything, but I feel like I should warn you.” Jesús said. “You should sleep on the couch tonight.”

“Why?”

“Trust me. If I were you, I would sack out on the couch and try to pass out early. Less awkward that way.”

It turned out Amber’s ex-boyfriend was coming into town. He’d played for the local team but had been traded to the one in Indianapolis. Indy was playing in town tonight, and he was going to get a bit of shore leave in my bed.

Indy plays our team every couple of weeks. I’ll come home and I’ll see his bag, brimming with hockey pads, his helmet on top with his mouth guard attached to the side. You’d

think witnessing something as loathsome as Amber and this hockey player would break the spell for me, but it hasn't. I think it's worse. I started staying late at the store—way after I've locked the doors and pulled the shades. I sit in the back and flip the light switches on and off. I make paper airplanes. I run them through the shredder.

I think Amber is pregnant again. She looks different. She smells different. Her stomach is rounding out, and I think her tits are bigger. Sometimes I imagine the baby is mine, that I made it by osmosis, that just by sleeping so close to her for so long I made something with her. I see myself as the child's tee-ball coach (I skipped the rougher years, I admit) and let him hit even past his three strikes—he never gets out at first, I disregard his fly-out, I let him hit till he makes it safely to home plate and is happy and content and has scored for the first time in his life and can maybe be restful with it. I don't think there's anything better than being restful. The thoughts that stop these dreams come when I remember that you have to be touching for osmosis to work. I try to tell myself I might have learned the biology wrong.

Russ came back. He was gone more than a week, and Jesús swore he didn't care if he ever showed back up, but I guess they made up in whatever way they have. Russ is getting a lot smaller than he used to be. Jesús doesn't let him take the supplements anymore. He doesn't go to the apartment weight room. He still talks about the police academy, but I think even he knows it's never going to happen now. I bought him an MPD sweatshirt. It was his birthday. He likes it. He wears it all the time.

I started calling escort services. I found a phonebook in the back of the store, and that's where I have them meet me. I call them after dark, after the store is closed up for the night, when I'm the only one there. I always ask if they have any girls that look maternal, and they always tell me they've got just the girl for every client. All the girls look kind of the same to me. Dark

roots, dark stubble under their arms, too skinny. The most I do is let them suck me off. I sleep better now than I have in a while. I guess I had a lot of pent up energy.

I'm going to talk one of those whores into going somewhere with me. None of them are beautiful, but they're alright. I've got a little bit of money saved up—what I didn't blow on the girls—and I can find another job, and if she gets some honest work, we can probably pay for our own apartment. And my mom won't have my number anymore, I think she's gotta go at it alone from now on. And no one will share a bed in a way they don't want to, and the girl will want to share my bed with me. My bed. My bed, that I'm taking with me, in the back of my truck. And I'm going to take the dog too. Maybe I'll find better owners for her, maybe that owner will be me. I want to drive south, where no one would ever think of having a hockey team, where no one shares a bed just to keep from being cold, where it's warmer than it ever is here.

#### IV. Sam and Angie

They stayed silent for the first hour of the trip, but neither of them much noticed. Sam tried his best to see the road through whirring windshield wipers, and Angie daydreamed as she watched endless pines fly by outside the passenger window.

Angie looked over at her Sam. His thin shoulder blades poked up as he hunched over the wheel. She rubbed his thigh over his khakis.

“I wish your boss would have let you go sooner,” she said. “He knew where you were going.”

“I know,” Sam said. He leaned closer to the windshield. “He said he was sorry, but he really needed me to finish a window display. There’s a reading and signing tomorrow.”

“I’ve never heard of anyone being held up on their way to a wake to finish a *window* display,” Angie said.

“I just don’t want to step on any toes,” Sam said.

“Baby, I’m not saying I think you should have said anything--”

“No no no no no, I’m not trying to *justify* myself to you. That’s just how I feel. I haven’t been there very long.”

“I know. But my sister died. Doesn’t he understand that?”

“Maybe I should have said something,” Sam said. “I’m sorry. I just still feel very edgy around him.”

“No no baby, I don’t think you did anything wrong.”

Sam sighed. “Okay.” He ran his hand from her knee to the hemline of her black dress and rested it where the fabric met her skin. “I guess you didn’t have any trouble getting out of work early,” he said.

“I just had to go in and drop off a couple of lesson plans. My student teacher is doing a great job, so they’re going to let her take over for a few days.”

“That’s good,” Sam said. “That’s good.”

It was Angie’s second year teaching elementary school, and—as she told Sam almost every day—she was really starting to get a feel for it. Sam started teaching high school English the same time Angie began teaching second grade, but he hadn’t been asked back for a second year. There were rumors that most of his classes consisted of him making his students copy-edit drafts of his novel. There were rumors that his breath smelled too minty most of the day, and near the end of the week especially so. Now he worked in a bookstore and wrote on his days off. He attended meetings after nights Angie said he was out of hand, on the days when his apologies weren’t enough for her.

“When’s the last time you spoke to your sister?” Sam said.

Angie didn’t say anything for a while.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Sam said. “I thought it might help.”

“Help what?” Angie said.

“Well,” Sam said. “This has been a long week. This is a long drive. I thought it might be hard on you.”

Really Sam noticed no difference in Angie since her mother called with the news. She shed no tears. She had told Sam calmly about her sister’s death as soon as she got off the telephone with her mother.

“We got in a fight at my college graduation dinner,” Angie said. “It was just one of those things. I don’t remember what we argued about. We just never made up.”



Sam did a little math in his head. Four years. She didn't speak to her sister for the last four years of her life. He didn't know what to say to her. He spoke to his own brother nearly every week.

"Are you hearing that?" Sam said. "That thump?"

Every time Sam pushed the old Camry past sixty-five, he thought he heard a slight disturbance from under the front of the car. When the needle inched towards seventy, he felt a pull towards the median from the driver's side tire.

"I don't feel anything," Angie said. Sam felt the thump and the pull again.

"Right then," he said. "Just now."

"I think you're—"

"Shhhhh," he waved his hand at her and pointed at the hood. "Right there."

"I think you're imagining it. I can't even hear it."

"No, no. It feels different when you're driving. You can feel it through the wheel and the pedals. I'm more connected."

"You sure it's not just the rain? Things feel different in the rain."

"It's not the rain," Sam said. "I'm pulling off at the next service station."

"We're going to miss the whole thing," Angie said. "I'm never going to hear the end of it."

"I've got to figure out what's going wrong," Sam said, "before it gets worse."

Angie sighed. "I know. I'm sorry. You're right."

They drove on for a few miles. Sam winced every time he felt the thumps. Angie tapped her fingers on the door.

"There's a sign," Sam said.

“Only one gas station at this exit,” Angie said. “Don’t you need, like, a mechanic or something?”

“I just want to look at it. Maybe I can fix it.”

Sam turned the car off the interstate and drove down the potholed exit ramp. The slower the car went the less he heard thumping sounds coming from the vehicle’s wheel wells.

The sign at the end of the ramp was rusty and hard to read. Sam slowed and stared at it. He decided it pointed left, but he could see no lights in the distance in either direction. Angie sighed. Sam sucked in a breath quickly, as if he was about to say something to her, but he exhaled slowly instead and concentrated on the road ahead.

They drove for two miles, and still saw nothing but pine trees and the occasional dead animal on the road. The rain eased up.

“Maybe we should turn—“

“I’m driving until I see something,” Sam said. “I don’t care what it is. But I have to see something.”

Sam was driving under forty miles an hour now, but he was starting to hear the thump again.

“I can hear it now,” Angie said.

“I see something,” Sam said.

Down beyond a curve in the road a flickering light hung from a telephone pole. Under the light was a gravel parking lot and two ancient gas pumps. An old building with a tin roof leaned against the telephone pole as if it required the pole for support. Yellow light shone through the building’s few dusty panes that weren’t covered by Budweiser advertisements and hand painted signs advertising COLD BEER.

Sam pulled the car in front of the two gas pumps and looked in the building. He could see a squat man sitting behind the counter. Sam stepped out of the car, and the man walked out of the building. The man grinned as he plodded out in faded blue jeans and a tattered Baltimore Ravens t-shirt. Much of the bottom of the Ravens logo was tucked into his jeans, so brief was his torso. Sam was not a tall man, but he stood at least a foot taller than the gas station attendant.

“Bout to close,” the man said. “Need to fill up?”

Sam explained his situation to the attendant. The attendant got down on his hands and knees in the wet gravel, not noticing the puddles that freckled the ground.

“Here’s your problem,” the attendant said. He pointed up and inside the bumper of the small car. “The engine guard come a’loose. Pulled the plastic right out from the bumper. That’s what’s dragging on your tire.”

Angie opened her door and stepped out. She looked down at the small man crawling around the front of the car. She looked at Sam and cocked an eyebrow at him. The man got up and swiped his hands together, knocking off gravel.

“I can fix you right up. You’ll need to get this done right at a body shop, but I can zip tie it up for now. Should hold for a while.”

“Thank you sir,” Sam said. “We really appreciate it.”

“No problem at all,” the attendant said. He walked around the back of the gas station. When he had been gone for a few minutes a woman came out of the door of the gas station. She was large and oddly shaped. Elephantine calves emerged from the bottom of her long, denim skirt. Her plain cotton t-shirt bulged where it tucked into her skirt.

“Larry fixing y’all up?” she said. “Come inside while you wait.” The woman walked back into the store without waiting on Sam and Angie.

Sam tried his best to think of an excuse not to go in, but Angie started towards the door before he could say anything. He couldn't explain why he was seized by anxiety in the parking lot, but he'd felt that way since he got out of the car. He tried to swallow, but his throat tightened up, too dry to do so. I'll just buy a coke, he thought. Be sociable with this woman. They're helping me out.

The inside of the gas station smelled like the inside of all small convenience stores. Smells of stale cigarettes, urinal cakes, and bright pink soap hung in the air. The store boasted three racks of junk food and three coolers. Two of the coolers overflowed with beer, and one housed a meager selection of sodas. The woman waddled back behind the counter.

Angie picked out a package of gum and put it on the counter. Sam got a beer out of one of the coolers and put it next to the gum. Angie looked over at him with pursed lips.

"Funerals are stressful," Sam said. "I'm just going to have this one."

"Just let him have one to take the edge off," the woman behind the counter said. "I was near unconscious on tranquilizers at the last funeral I went to. They didn't want me to be hysterical."

"Funerals must really affect you," Angie said. She held out a five dollar bill the woman ignored.

"Well, it was my son's funeral. He got killed over in Iraq."

"I'm...sorry to hear that," Angie said, still holding out the five dollar bill.

Sam cleared his throat and licked his lips. The woman bent down behind the counter and ruffled around among the shelves below the cash register.

“Here’s the announcement,” she said. She placed a yellowed newspaper over the gum on the counter. The paper showed a picture of a marine in dress blues with a brief article describing his death. “He died doing what he loved,” the woman said.

“What a sacrifice,” Angie said. She put the money down on the counter. A door opened behind the woman and Larry walked in rubbing dirt from his hands.

“Got you fixed up,” he said. He saw the newspaper on the counter and his face tightened. He sneered at the woman. “My wife boring you talking about my no-good stepson? She tell you why he had to join the service in the first place?”

Sam eased away from the counter. “Now now,” he said. “We weren’t bored. We do kind of need to be getting—”

“Why do you think we never have any customers? With you blathering all the time about that dead marine?”

“Larry—“ she said.

“Shut up, woman,” Larry said. He struck her across the face with the back of his hand. Angie gasped. Sam stuck where he stood. He didn’t say a word. The woman cried silently. She picked up the newspaper clipping and started to go out the back door. Larry shoved her against the wall, bumping her chin against a support beam. He said, “I didn’t say you could leave just yet.”

“Sam,” Angie said.

But what could he do? What did she expect him to do? These people’s domestic problems were none of his business. He was ready to forget about the beer and the gum and just jump in the car and go.

“Please,” Angie said, “do something.”

Larry stood in front of his wife, blocking her way, daring her to try to leave again.

Sam cleared his throat, struggling for something to say. "Listen, Larry," he started. His voice cracked a little. "Shouldn't we all calm down? We weren't bothered by your wife." His hands shook and his lip twitched visibly.

Larry turned around and looked at him as if for the first time. The little man walked around the counter and up to Sam. "Are you telling me how to treat my wife?" Larry said. "You can't fix your car, but you can fix my wife?"

Sam shook his head, speechless.

"Let's just go," Angie said. She sounded younger than Sam knew she was.

"I asked you a question, boy," Larry said.

"I just—I just—" Sam said. Larry pushed his chest against Sam's. "I just don't think you should get out of hand—"

"Out of hand?" Larry said. "Out of hand?" He thumped Sam on the collar bone with his knuckles as if knocking on a door. Sam gawped at Larry and struggled to breathe. Larry reared back to hit him again, but stopped, looking down at Sam's khakis.

"Awe, shit," he said. "Goddam, boy."

Sam stood without moving. His body shook.

"Sam," Angie said.

"Get outta here," Larry said. "I ain't gonna hit a man like that." He still stared at his khakis. "Just go." He shook his head. "What a man." Larry took the beer off the counter and handed it to Sam. "Shit. Take this too."

Sam took the beer from Larry and opened it.

"*Sam*," Angie said.

Sam looked over at his Angie and then down at his pants. A wet oval stretched from his crotch to down below his left knee. Urine pooled inside his left loafer. He drank deep from the beer. Angie followed close behind him as he walked from the store. He kicked a little with his left leg to pull the wet fabric off his thigh as he walked. He opened the passenger door and sat down, still sucking on beer. Angie adjusted the seat and mirrors on the driver's side without saying a word. Sam looked over at Angie and took another gulp of the beer, already noticing how soon it would all be gone.

## V. If I Met My Father

One day when I was fourteen, my sister Sarah and I got off the school bus and I saw a car I didn't recognize parked in the grass between the end of the gravel driveway and the old tan cinderblock house I grew up in. I remember it was September. It was hot. My new shoes were still stiff. We never had visitors in those days—my father didn't like people coming to the house. Even the preacher had only been to dinner once, and my father's cold silence had ran him off before the chocolate pie was served. So a strange car was strange to see. And my father was not yet home.

That house—I lived in it for a time after my mother died, when I had nowhere to be—sat between a soybean field and a tract of land my father and my uncle hunted squirrels and rabbits on, always without me. There wasn't another house for two miles in either direction down the road, though my father didn't own more than fifty acres. Fifty acres I sold for timber and then outright years ago.

Even at that age something in me knew all was not as it should be, and so I told Sarah to play on the swing under the tree down a little ways from the house. Sarah was five then, and not as curious about the people around her as she would come to be as she matured. She would do anything I told her. I had not yet completely dried up the well of trust a younger sibling affords the older one for a time.

From the top step of the front porch I could see through the two large windows into the living room. I saw the back of my mother's head; she sat in the rocking chair in front of the window. Across the room from her on the divan was an older woman, probably in her fifties, with her silver-black hair pulled back in a neat bun. Beside the woman was a girl my age or older with tight, thick, yellow pinned up braids and a face sterner than my father's.



The woman and the girl saw me through the window. I didn't know what else to do but walk inside.

"Hello," I said.

The older woman smiled at me. The girl's cold stern expression didn't change. I was startled by the smell of cigarettes in the house. My mother kept an ashtray by the window, but my father couldn't stand the smell, so even when my mother's brothers came over—chimneys all of them—they smoked outside.

"James," my mother said. "How was school?" Without waiting for me to answer she said, "James is the oldest."

"Your oldest," the woman said. She was the smoker. No cigarette burned, but a pack of Lucky Strikes sat on the coffee table in front of her.

My mother's voice sounded strange and her smile was tighter than I had known it to be before. Though a tall woman, she seemed small, somehow, in the room that day. I believe she seemed smaller to me from that day on. Maybe the whole house did.

"Where's Sarah?" my mother said.

"Swinging," I said.

"That's good," she said. "James, this is Mrs. George Paulson and her granddaughter Scarlett. Don't be rude. Introduce yourself."

"James Bell," I said. I shook both of their hands. "Nice to meet both of you."

"Likewise," Mrs. Paulson said.

The girl just nodded, but her eyes were wide.

"Have a seat," Mrs. Paulson said.

I crossed the room and sat on the white brick hearth of the fireplace, cold since March.

“Mrs. Paulson and Scarlett come down all the way from Memphis,” my mother said.

“Well, Scarlett lived in Memphis,” Mrs. Paulson said. “I live in Chattanooga.”

At that time Memphis seemed like New York City to me—but a New York City that was cracking down the middle. This was 1964.

“Did you know your father used to live in Memphis?” Mrs. Paulson said.

“No ma’am,” I said.

“He drove a streetcar after the war, until they closed the streetcar line. Or was that why he left Memphis? I forget.”

“Mrs. Paulson,” my mother said. “George will be home shortly. Couldn’t you take this up with him?” She sat stiff, on the front edge of the chair—as still as it is possible to sit in a rocking chair.

I feel I have to reiterate the difference this woman’s presence had on my mother’s. Before this day, I had only seen my mother yield like this to my father. Her energy and will was never contained by anyone else. And now she was bending for this strange, smoking woman.

“Of course, dear,” Mrs. Paulson said. “How do you like it out here? It’s pretty as a picture.”

“I like it just fine,” my mother said.

“And George still drives a truck for the county?”

“Yes,” my mother said. “Scarlett, would you like another glass of tea?”

“No ma’am,” Scarlett said.

“She likes sweet tea,” Mrs. Paulson said.

“I am sorry about that,” my mother said.

“Driving is just about all George has ever done, isn’t it. Driving for the Army, for the city of Memphis, for Panola County, just driving away in general,” Mrs. Paulson said.

I could see, out through the windows, far off down the gravel road past where the old bridge went over the stream that eventually becomes Hickahala Creek, the dust rising from behind my father’s county owned white Chevrolet.

“He’s driving here now,” I said.

Mrs. Paulson, Scarlett, and I watched his slow approach without words. What different suspense it must have been for all of us. It felt shared then, but how could it have been comparable? My mother had her back to the window and didn’t move to look. How many times had she seen him round that curve before the bridge, coming home to her?

The truck pulled up next to Mrs. Paulson’s black sedan. I don’t remember the make of the car, but I do remember one of the headlights was busted. My father stepped out and looked at the car and up at the house. He was a tall man, taller than I would ever be, and he wore blue jeans and a dusty red button down shirt. He held the pith helmet he always wore to work in his right hand. Sarah must have called to him from the swing because he lifted his free hand to her. Then he walked up to the house.

When he opened the door, my mother stood up.

My father saw Mrs. Paulson and said, “Martha?”

“George, you may want to sit down,” Mrs. Paulson said.

My father looked around. There was nowhere to sit except the chair my mother had just left. He put his hand on her shoulder and she sat back down.

“Carol’s dead,” Mrs. Paulson said. “James is too.”

No, I’m not, I wanted to say. I’m right here. I’m not dead.

My father didn't look particularly affected. He looked confused. My mother was looking at him. I was looking at him. Everyone was looking at him.

"What happened?" he said.

"Carol ran the car under a tractor trailer outside of Little Rock," Mrs. Paulson said, "James was in the passenger seat."

Scarlett sucked in air between her teeth.

"James," my father said, "take Scarlett outside and play with Sarah."

I'm not dead, I wanted to say.

Scarlett was out the door before I moved, her braids motionless no matter how quickly she left.

"Please, James," my father said. He'd never said please to me before. I went outside, but I wanted to stay and to hear what was going to be said very badly.

The sun was going down, but it hadn't started its descent yet. And it was still very hot. Scarlett leaned against the hood of her grandmother's car. She was wearing a navy dress and I worried that she would get dust from the car all over it, but I didn't mention it. She seemed more composed than she had been. I now know that she was three years older than me, and it was clearer to see when she stood up in the brighter light—she was a beautiful girl.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She looked at me like I might look at Sarah, and Sarah was only five at that time. She said, "You haven't done nothing to me."

"Carol was your mother," I said. I was surprised at my own daring.

“Yeah,” she said. “She was. And she used to be married to your daddy. And I’m your half-sister. And James was your half-brother.”

I think that I must have realized this inside, before my father even got home, but it didn’t hit me until she said it out loud. I was not my father’s firstborn. I was not my father’s oldest son. I did not even have my own name. Sarah, down the way, swinging as before, did. But I did not.

“My grandmother says I ought to live with y’all, but I think she’s just down here looking for some money. But y’all don’t have any money,” she said, “do you?”

“No, not really,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said. “Don’t look like it.”

“Why’d he leave your mom?” I asked.

“I don’t remember him at all,” she said, “but Grandma says they both drank a lot.”

“He doesn’t drink,” I said.

“He doesn’t drink *anymore*,” she said.

I saw my father look out at Scarlett from the living room. He was still standing up, between Mrs. Paulson and my mother’s rocking chair, but my mother was gone. He shook his head and pointed at Mrs. Paulson.

“What was your brother like?” I said.

“He was mean,” Scarlett said, “but he could be nice sometimes.”

“Gosh,” I said. I sat down in the grass.

“I know,” she said. “But at least you’ve still got your parents.”

I didn’t really. But I didn’t know that yet.

She kissed me on the top of the head and all the hair on my arms and on the back of my neck stood up. In a few moments her grandmother came out of the house and they got in the black sedan and drove away.

In six months my father was gone. One evening his truck didn't round the bend. We sat at the table, waiting for my father to get home so we could begin dinner. Finally, my mother let Sarah eat and a little later I ate too. My mother didn't eat that night or for many after.

At the time, those six months in between seemed like the worst that could ever occur, with the way my mother and father raised their voices to each other every night, but it felt even worse once he left. Looking back I don't remember a time when my parents seemed like they loved each other, but they never destroyed each other like they did in those months. My mother calling my father a ghost an apparition an empty vessel a liar who she could never ever ever trust again. My father mostly silent, mostly glaring, mostly looking out the window into the dark but sometimes telling her she knew everything she wanted to know and she knew it.

As far as if there was love between them before that time, how could a child tell? It is very hard and taxing to work all day—on the highway or in the house. Maybe things were different when they were younger. Maybe it was something they kept to themselves.

In a couple of years my mother told me more about what had been said that day when I was out in the yard listening to Scarlett—who didn't seem real to me—did she kiss me? Did she say those things? My mother assured me she was there. She said it was the first time she had heard of any of it. She knew of no other woman. She knew of no other children.

Even only a few years later, my mother looked like a different woman. With my father gone she found work at the Fruit of the Loom factory and she supported us, but it took a lot away

from her. I remember how she looked when she told me, veined hands wrapped around a cup of tea, her hair grey at the top of the forehead but still mostly dark brown. She seemed eager to get rid of these memories, not that they could be taken away, but it still meant something to share them, maybe—some of the weight would come to me. I was prepared to do that for her.

She said Mrs. Paulson was, really, mainly looking for money. She had no intentions of leaving Scarlett with us. She hated my father. She hated “what he had done to her daughter,” though my father insisted they were both drunks when they met—he had been no corrupter. Mrs. Paulson was shrewd, she saw nothing worth taking, but she did leave a few barbs for my father to remember her by. My mother wouldn’t repeat them. She said she left the room.

“I still don’t know,” my mother said, “if he was married to that other woman or not. He said he wasn’t. He said the boy was his. He did not claim Scarlett. I just don’t know.”

My mother never remarried or even dated anyone again, to my knowledge. And I think she would have told me. My sister stayed in town, and mom kept her kids for her during the day as long as they were young enough. She got a lot out of that.

What troubled me immediately after that day, and what troubles me still, is how little I knew about my father. If I met my father again, though I am sure he is dead now, I would want to ask him why he kept these things from my mother and from me. Divorce was still a shameful thing then, but it was not unheard of. He used to drink a lot? He didn’t drink when I knew him. He was a cold man but he wasn’t cruel. What made him so cold? Did it mean that I would have to be that way? I admit that I have lived as he lived, moving from woman to woman, but I haven’t left any children behind, and things always ended on their own terms—it was never anything you could blame anyone for.

And, if I met my father again, I would ask him what it meant that he named me James second. I've convinced myself that it was his father's name, but even that I don't know for sure. My mother couldn't help, she couldn't remember or she never knew. But even if it was for his father, to be named James second (and not James the second as it would be if I was named after his father) what was that supposed to mean? Was I a replacement for the first James? When I became the *only* James, my father was gone. Was the first James not worthy of the honor? The name must have meant something to my father, so he had to name me James, to try again? So maybe I could live up to it? Did I pale in comparison to the first, in my father's eyes? I can never know and it doesn't matter because he wasn't there anyway. He wasn't there to see if I lived up to anything at all.

Two years ago I ran into Scarlett in a grocery store outside of Panama City, Florida. She looked much different, it had been forty-four years, but she had her hair, now white, pinned up in the same tight thick braids she wore on that day her grandmother brought the news that would break up my family. Oddly, she reminded me of my mother. She had warm, kind eyes, but her posture and her hands betrayed hard times. I stopped her in front of a dairy cooler. She held a tub of sour cream in her hand.

"I'm James Bell," I said. "Your half-brother."

She put the sour cream back down and embraced me. I was stiff at first, but the gesture seemed so genuine and important that I relaxed into her as I can't remember doing with other people.

"How are you?" she said.

"I'm surprised."



“Do you live in Panama City?” she asked.

“Mexico Beach,” I said. “And you?”

“Right near here,” she said. “My husband worked for Gulf Power.”

“I see,” I said.

“I’ve been thinking about going back to Chattanooga,” she said. “Since Clark passed. My daughters and grandchildren live there.”

“I’m sorry about your loss,” I said.

Scarlett laughed. “We’ve had this conversation before.”

A woman said, “Excuse me,” and started digging through different packets of shredded cheese.

“Would you like to get a drink?” I said.

“You don’t like the grocery store?” Scarlett said.

“Well,” I said.

“I can get a coffee,” she said. “There’s a café in the front here. I think it’s pretty reasonable.”

I heard about her grandchildren for a while. We spoke about our father briefly. She’d never seen him again either. She’d heard something about Alaska once and that seemed right to me. Somewhere up in that cold wilderness.

We said we would have coffee again, but I lived fifty miles south. She died last week. I saw it in the paper. The last name was unfamiliar but the dates were right. In the obituary I saw that one of her grandsons was named James the fourth and that seemed like a nice thing to me.

## VI. Where We Were Getting Away From

I was drinking far too much at the time. I was between jobs with a couple hundred in the bank hoping I could make it last for at least a few weeks before I had to reenter the work force. My fiancé kicked me out of the house before I lost my last job so I'd been living in my parents' basement rent-free but not completely free from obligations. They'd gotten pretty indignant that I was living off their good will and familial love without ever being close enough to either of them for them to feel like there was anyone there to receive it. I was absent, I suppose. I've been accused of that before, in many different contexts. I didn't often leave the basement. When I did I exited through the basement door. They invited me to dinner regularly, but I wasn't always awake when my mother came down in the evening to coax me up. None of this makes me happy to report. But this is the way things had been going.

I made a trip to the nearest gas station around three in the afternoon one day, before my parents got home. A new one had opened up just outside their neighborhood, so I could walk; no need to waste precious gasoline. The day was bright and hot—the thermometer outside's needle stuck between 90 and 100—and sweat streamed down my face and my back. I wore sunglasses but they didn't shield my eyes enough. Electric blue and pale pink floaters skated across my eyes every time I moved them from one point of focus to the next.

It was mostly quiet on the neighborhood streets but when I walked on the busier road to the gas station several cars honked, their horns impaling my head slowly and echoing like an empty hallway between my ears. The roar of the cars passing by was seconded by the clattering the tires made beneath them as they traveled over the cracked and potholed asphalt. The city

council is in the shitter right now; there isn't much money for anything; the roads are going to pot.

What had once been an empty grassy field, a last bastion between a bankrupt development and a glowing new fortress of a bank, was now a freshly asphalted parking lot with bright white concrete sidewalks leading to the doors of a brand new shiny convenience store. The concrete was so fresh you could still see the muddy tracks contractors had made walking over it, as soon as it was hard enough to do so.

I bought four 32-ounce Budweiser beers. I don't know why I don't buy six or twelve packs. I'm not sure which way is cheaper but I've just grown to really admire the look and feel of a big bottle. They didn't have my cigarettes in shorts so I had to buy the 100s. I didn't really mind but the Pakistani guy behind the counter was apologetic and wrote it down and told me they'd have it next time. Just opened today, he told me, and handed me a brown bag for the big bottle I'd already opened.

The walk back wasn't any cooler, but the cold beer in my hand and the heavy bag in my other held the strength of the sun back a little. Anyway, a trip back when you've seen the path once always seems to go by about twice as fast to me.

The woman I had previously lived with wanted to marry me at one point. She would have if I hadn't changed her mind. I didn't change her mind with a conversation or with a single action. I did it with lots of actions. You get to a place where a conversation with someone means less to you than watching a half hour of South Park. But you know what? South Park makes me laugh. I'm not trying to make her sound like a terrible person because I think it's important that someone is listening to someone when someone needs to speak. I just don't know if I'd ever be

able to do that. Maybe that's what love is, and maybe I'll never be able to do that. I would like someone to listen to me, though, so I understand why she was unhappy.

When I got back to the apartment, I finished the first big beer and drank another. I passed out for a while after that until I was awakened by a knocking on my basement door. I moved my tongue around my parched mouth and checked my watch on the way to the door. Ten till nine o'clock. I opened my door to Mike, an old friend I'd known since we were kids. He too lived with his parents, just down the street. Mike has had a hard time living on his own since an unfortunate statutory rape allegation made him a sex offender. I say unfortunate and allegation because he was never actually charged by the girl or her parents. Unfortunately, he was the girl's assistant band director at the local high school, and the school district doesn't smile on that type of publicity or behavior. He lived with the girl and her parents for a while until she died in a car accident. He was actually on the phone with her when her car went off the road and smashed into a tree. They don't publish the tragic details next to your face in the catalogue of sex offenders on the government website. I'm not apologizing for sex offenders--just know that Mike has had a rough run of it.

I let him in and sat down on the couch. I'm sort of embarrassed about what the basement looks like, but Mike isn't really in a position to pity. I turned on the TV and put on something about nature on the Discovery Channel.

"I've been calling you," Mike said.

"I was sleeping," I said. "And my phone might be dead. You're about the only person who calls."

"You been drinking?" he said.

“A little. Get a beer out of the mini-fridge. Get me one too.” Mike obliged and sat down next to me.

“Listen, how you been?” I said.

“Not great. My parents keep on telling me to get a job, but I’m having a hard time. The only thing I’m qualified for will never ever be an option again.”

“Yeah,” I said. “At least you’re qualified for something.”

“Almost makes it worse,” he said. He rubbed his little red nose. Mike has a childish, moony face. A face incapable of facial hair. Looking at him, it doesn’t seem possible that he’s even old enough to be guilty of statutory rape.

“What about you,” he said. “Looking for a job?”

“Not yet. I’ll have to before too long.”

“You could do whatever you want,” he said. “Why are you squatting here?”

This was a pretty good question and I considered it for a while. I pulled out some papers and started rolling a cigarette.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just don’t really want to do anything. I’m okay here for right now. Maybe something will make me want to do something. I don’t know what that could be, but right now I have no motivation to do any kind of work.”

I lit up the cigarette and puffed. I gestured with the tobacco to Mike. He waved his hands dismissively and shook his head.

“Let’s go out tonight,” he said. “I’m tired of sitting on couches and watching TV.”

“I don’t know,” I said. What I just said about not really wanting to do anything was sort of the point in this situation. I’m fine sitting on couches and watching TV.

“C’mon,” he said. “I’ll cover you. I’ll even drive.”

“Didn’t you just get a dooey?”

“It doesn’t matter. There aren’t ever any roadblocks on this side of town.”

“Well. How’d you get the dooey, then?”

“I was on the other side of town.”

“Hmmm. Lemme finish smoking,” I said. “Let’s finish the beer and then I guess I’ll go.”

It’s nice to have Mike around from time to time, if only because he’s a person to talk to, but he does drag me down into a sort of windowless basement of despair when I think about him for too long. He has awfully supportive parents that he’s always had an excellent relationship with, and I can’t help but imagine over and over again what it must have been like for him to tell them how he’d lost his livelihood and professional future forever. It makes me so sad to think how that silly young stupid seventeen-year-old girl was the only thing he had to hold on to as the rest of his life came tumbling down. I think about my own adolescent infatuations and shudder to think of pinning everything on the whims of a young woman just becoming who she would eventually be. And then even that small shred of hope was ripped away in a few seconds while he listened to her car explode into a tree. The shriek of steel and rubber ended what little he had left. Imagine that funeral! How terrible. How odd.

We went to a local sports bar frequented by high school students and middle-aged singles. The place regularly gets shut down for serving to minors, but somehow it always opens back up. We sat at a table in the back and drank some whiskey drinks. We didn’t talk much. Young girls in tight jerseys and short shorts delivered drinks and got ogled by older men. Younger guys, still in high school or just still in town after graduation flirted with young girls with too much makeup on. A DJ with an elaborate light machine played remixes of popular songs, but no one much danced.

A girl across the room locked eyes with me. I recognized her from somewhere but couldn't place it. I smiled at her and nodded. She gestured me over. As I got a better look at her I remembered who she was. Annie was five years behind me in school. We were in the band together my senior year. She was cute even then, an eighth grader who had been accepted to start early in the big high school band.

"Hey there," she said. "Didn't know you were back in town."

"I'm here for a while. Taking a break. You look great."

"Aw, thanks," she said. I remembered some of my friends telling me that the rumor was she'd given HPV to most of the guys she knew in college. She looked great, though. Her eye-shadow pointed strangely towards her nose under both eyes, but still she looked pretty great.

"I haven't seen you in ages," she said. "I was still in high school."

"You graduate yet?" I asked.

"Last year," she said. "I'm going to law school in the fall."

"That's great," I said. "That's just great." Thankfully she didn't ask what I'd been doing. It isn't a long story, but it also isn't a fun one.

"I notice you're here with Mr. Cunningham," she said.

"Oh, Mike. Yeah. He was a couple of years ahead of me in the band. We sat next to each other."

"I haven't seen him since Lacey's funeral."

"I guess he tries to keep a pretty low profile. You were in the band for that whole mess?"

"Oh, yeah," she said. "It was pretty wild. Some Memphis news stations tried to interview us after band practice, but Mr. Longman ran them all off." Mr. Longman had been the band

director at the high school since well before I was there. I've heard he took the whole situation pretty hard. He hired Mike, after all.

I talked with Annie for a while. She bought me a couple of drinks. I felt bad for leaving Mike alone, but after I'd been talking to Annie for a while I looked over and saw that he was talking to someone. Annie and I talked mostly about people we'd known in high school, what they were doing now, what they weren't doing that we thought they would have been doing. Who was pregnant, who was pregnant and married, who was already divorced. We laughed a lot talking about some of the people we used to know. It's best not to think how you yourself play in these same conversations other people probably have.

"I didn't mean to steal you away from Mike," Annie said.

"He seems okay," I said. I looked over. "Man, looks like those two are talking about something interesting."

Mike was sitting straight up, with his arms on the table, his hands wrapped around his drink. He was shaking his head and his mouth was moving quickly. The other man sat across from him, leaning in, pointing his index finger in Mike's direction.

"Oh, shit," Annie said. "That's Lacey's brother."

Though Lacey's parents had embraced Mike, Lacey's brother Steven, a football coach at the same high school, had never supported them being together.

Steven stood up. Mike was still talking at him, but when Steven pushed the table aside, Mike stood up and backed towards the wall, his hands in front of him. Steven picked up Mike's chair and threw it at him. The backrest of the chair hit Mike in the teeth and he crumpled on the floor, trying to wiggle under the table Steven had pushed away, though the toppled chair was in his way. Steven kicked the chair over Mike and it landed between his head and the wall.



He's going to kill him, I thought, and began to move toward Mike, but Annie grabbed my shoulder.

Steven kicked Mike's head against one of the chair's legs for what seemed like a very long time. Finally, several of the men in the bar moved slowly towards Steven.

They pulled him away from the bloody sphere that used to be Mike's head and sat him down. They hadn't moved quick enough to slow down anything he was doing, but I guess he didn't really look like the kind of guy you wanted to get in between when something like that was going on. The bartender was shouting into the telephone for an ambulance. After Steven sat down, he sort of put his head on a table and breathed real heavy, the muscles moving through the back of his t-shirt.

The excitement over, the sound of the bar began to pick back up. Only a few minutes had elapsed but I felt very very tired.

"Shit," Annie said.

"Shit," I said back. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

"Weren't you here with Mike?"

"Where he's going," I said, "I don't think I can help." I said. I'm not sure I could have helped him ever anyway. Have I ever helped anyone?

"I don't have a car," I said. "I rode with Mike."

"I can't drive," Annie said.

"I'll do it."

"You think you can?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said.

We got out to her car and buckled up. The car and the seatbelt and the steering wheel where so tactile compared to the way the violence had flickered across the room before. I felt the drinks in my head and in my limbs, but it was time to go. I gunned the gas a little more than I wanted to and the tires gave off some noise, but it didn't matter. All the sirens and spinning lights were coming to where we were getting away from.

## VII. A Real Character

My first year of graduate school I moved to a new place where I knew no one, so I roomed with a man named Owen, who was also in my program. Near the end of the year I lived with Owen, he wrecked his car in a silly but serious way. Though he counted out his monthly allotment of Adderall pills twice a day, he always seemed to come up short at the end of the month. Or he would fear he was going to come up short, and this would unsettle him as well. One day near the end of April, he was either without his attention deficit order corrective or worried he soon would be in the days to come. Either way, he wasn't focusing on the road, he was fiddling with the radio, he was daydreaming as he blew through a stop sign and t-boned a sorority girl in a Subaru Outback. She was fine. Her car was surprisingly capable of driving away after the insurance cards had been swapped and the police had written their report. Owen's seventeen-year-old Saturn was not so lucky.

He called me from the side of the road. Moments before, I had arrived home to our dusty basement apartment from a long day of teaching composition. I opened what windows there were, put on *Katy Lied* and dunked my hands into a sudsy sink to wash a huge pile of dishes (most of these dirty dishes actually belonged to Owen, but he never washed them and didn't mind fruitflies or foul smells or really any general disorder, so the housekeeping was up to me). It was the first day of spring. It was a Friday afternoon and I had plans for the evening. I wanted to drop into the Zen vacantness of washing dishes while gazing out the open windows and decompressing before an evening of fraternization with friends. The weekend had just begun, you know?

This was not to be.

When I picked up Owen, the first thing I asked was, the police wouldn't give you a ride? I felt bad for his misfortune, but I was annoyed. It seemed like his misfortune always affected and had to be resolved, in the end, by me.

"I didn't want to put them out," he said. "I told them my friend would be by to get me soon."

"Protect and serve, Owen. Protect and serve!"

"More like molest and ticket," Owen said. To add to his woes he'd received a citation for the accident.

Owen wore his signature dirty baggy khakis and an elephantine tattered college hoodie. His hair was greasy and disheveled. His glasses were taped across the bridge and quite askew.

"Are you okay?" I said. "Any whiplash or anything?"

"I don't know. I can't even feel anything," he said. "My body is the last thing I'm worried about right now."

"Was the other driver hurt?"

"That's not what I mean. She's fine. Though I'm sure she'll have terrible back pain tomorrow, and I'm sure they'll total her barely scratched Subaru, and I'm sure it'll cost my dad thousands in insurance." The more he went on and on the more his voice moved up in register.

"Well, you know, this is why you have insurance in the first place, O-man."

"Why?" Owen wailed. "Why did this have to happen to me? Why did I have to hit another car? Why couldn't I have run into an object? A rotted tree no one wanted. Why couldn't it have just killed me? Then no one would need to fix a car or anything."

"Wow, O-man. Let's not talk like that."

“My dad can’t afford this hike in his insurance. I shouldn’t even be on his insurance! I’m thirty-two years old and still on my father’s car insurance!”

“Well, it’s okay, Owen. You know, adolescence has sort of extended, what with these global recessions and all and you know—”

“I begged the girl not to call the police. I told her I’d pay her out of pocket, but she didn’t believe me. She said she had to have the police report.”

Owen spat this out in almost a whimper. I recognized this tone of voice. It was his about-to-cry-voice. I had heard it many times before—most recently when I asked him to please stop eating all my packages of my peanut butter crackers. And maybe, if he was going to eat my frozen pizzas, maybe not to put the empty box back in the freezer.

“Maybe I can still convince her. I have her number. I’ll call her when we get back.”

And call her Owen did, after he popped a few Tylenol—he popped a few every couple of hours every day, he always said his stomach hurt—and switched from his signature dirty khakis to his classic blue pajama pants. If he was in the house, he was pajama-bottom clad—if he was without, he wore khakis. The hoody was constant unless it was warm and then he stripped it down to the white undershirt he always wore below.

The site of Owen’s accident was so near our shared basement apartment that the sudsy water in the sink was not only still sudsy; it was still warm. You might wonder, if it was that close, why did Owen need a ride? I did not wonder this.

Anyway, I turned the Steely Dan back on, cracked open a High Life, and I was again elbows deep in dirty dishes. I tried to enjoy the music and the newly green scenery out the large, open kitchen window, but I couldn’t help but tilt my ear towards Owen’s closed bedroom door. The intensity of his tone was cutting, troubling, severe. Eventually I turned down the music very

low and tried to make as little noise as possible as I washed knife after peanut butter-covered knife Owen had discarded into the sink.

Through the door I could hear:

“Hi, I know I’ve called quite a few times, but I haven’t heard back and timing is very important for this issue. Please don’t make a claim with your insurance company please just take it to a body shop and get an estimate I’ll pay it out of pocket this is very important to me please call back.”

Also:

“What am I gonna do, what am I gonna do, what am I gonna do?” accompanied by whimpering.

And then, a few minutes later:

“Yes, I had a missed call? Yes, this is he. A claim? There was a claim filed? Yes, I was in an accident. I was hoping maybe I could pay out of pocket. I don’t want to involve the insurance.”

A pause.

“No, you don’t understand. No, this is very important. I don’t want the insurance to pay. Well, find a way to unfile it. The person you are talking to right now, maybe I shouldn’t say this, but I’m not feeling all that—”

Heavy breathing.

“That may be, but I think you should know this is having repercussions for me. Repercussions you might not realize. Yes.”

I could hear him pacing from one side of his small room to the other.

“I am calm. You don’t know how calm I can be. I am very calm and I am not feeling depressed or suicidal at all!”

Then nothing.

Out the window I watched a bird land on the rusted clothesline post. Owen always flared towards the dramatic but something in his tone made my stomach knot up. I walked down the short hallway and knocked gently on Owen’s door.

“O-man?” I said. “You okay?”

“Leave me alone I’m busy leave me alone,” he said.

I stood outside the door, not knowing how to proceed.

“What am I gonna do, what am I gonna do, what am I gonna do,” he repeated over and over. I noticed, despite his distress, he was reciting roughly to the tune and rhythm of Mozart’s *Eine kleine Nachmusik*.

I returned to the kitchen and eased my hands into the much cooled down water. I found a bowl and as quietly as possible sponged it and rinsed it off, my ear still cocked towards Owen’s door. All was quiet for a while. I considered turning the music back up, but my concern and, to a greater extent, my curiosity, wouldn’t allow it.

Eventually Owen’s phone rang.

“Oh, no,” he said.

The phone continued to ring--the theme from *Super Mario Bros*.

“Hello,” he finally answered.

I gave up all pretense of dishwashing.

“I’m sorry, Dad!” he said. “I got in an accident. Yes. I’m fine. Physically.”

He was quiet for a few moments, listening.

“I didn’t threaten anyone. I was simply telling the agent how I feel. I am not feeling great. I’m out of Adderall and I’ve been through quite an ordeal.”

He sounded like a petulant child but one whose mother had just died.

“I don’t think the other car looked that bad,” he said. “But mine is totaled.”

His father said something to upset him even more.

“Well, maybe your insurance won’t go up at all because I don’t have a car anymore. Do you have life insurance for me? Maybe put the money you’ll get for my car into that because maybe you should get some life insurance on me. Might be profitable!”

Like a tree falling in a crowded forest he collapsed onto his mattress on the floor and erupted with wall shaking sobs. I tapped on the door.

“Owen?” I said.

“Leave me alone,” he wailed.

I had never been in a situation like this before and I took what he said very seriously. I was nervous—my stomach still clenched tightly and I could feel itchy pricks under my arms. My first thought was knives. I collected my old, dull chef’s knife and my new, sharp chef’s knife and a big, serrated bread knife (which I had to wash and dry off since it was still in the sink) and put them in my messenger bag in my room and hid the bag under the bed. Owen’s phone rang again and I galloped on tiptoes to his door to hear.

“Oh, hi, Samantha, good to hear back. No it’s all too late now if you’ve called your insurance company. The claim is going through. Thanks for calling back, though. It’s all too late now. Too late now. Bye.”

I remembered I had about twelve skewers for shish kebabs in the silverware drawer and hid them in the bottom of my sock drawer, just in case.



I tried tapping on Owen's door again.

"I'm dealing with something right now," he shouted.

I lifted my feet up and down as if I was walking away, then placed my ear to the door.

"Oh, no," he said. "Oh no oh no oh no," he said to himself, now tunelessly.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and looked up the number for the on campus counseling, T.A.P.S (short for therapy and psychological services, which seemed sort of a somber name at the time). As the phone rang, I walked outside but left the door open so I could hear if anything got really loud with Owen. I noticed that people were moving in to the top floor of our house. It had been vacant for months.

A man answered the line and asked me how he could help me.

"Uh, well," I said. The new neighbors were arranging furniture on their deck so I walked out to the street where I hoped they wouldn't be able to hear. "I think my roommate is thinking of killing himself."

"Where is he?"

"In his room."

"Is he a student?"

"A grad student. He's a patient of T.A.P.S from time to time."

"You live off campus?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Why do you think he wants to kill himself?"

"He ironically said he wasn't suicidal. Then he was talking to his dad on the phone and told him he better get life insurance for him."

"Have you talked to him?"

“He doesn’t want to leave his room.”

“Do you really think he’s going to kill himself?”

“I have to make that call? I don’t know. What do you think?”

“If you think he’s going to kill himself, call 911.”

“I mean we live right off campus, pretty near your offices.”

“We can’t do anything if he’s off campus. We’re open for another hour. If you can talk him into coming over, we’ll absolutely talk to him. Walk him over. If he won’t, and you think he’s going to kill himself, call 911.”

“That’s my only choice?”

“Pretty much.”

“Jesus.”

“Look. Get him to talk to you. Ask him directly if he’s going to kill himself. You’ll know what to do from there.”

I walked back to the house, where we had a couple of chairs near our door. I smoked a cigarette and thought a minute. I couldn’t hear anything within the apartment. As I finished, I remembered a big, rusty pair of scissors in the junk drawer and rushed in and hid it in a guitar case behind my bedroom door.

A few dishes were still in the sink, so I freshened up the water and washed them quickly. I wasn’t quite ready to talk to Owen. I couldn’t decide how to coax him out or how to talk to him about what I’d overheard. I could hear him moving around in his room, so I didn’t freak out though I was still very worried.

After a while he came out on his own, but he immediately entered the bathroom with his laptop in his hands—a normal habit of his. Nothing in the medicine cabinet could be used for

harm. We didn't even own cough syrup, and Owen used Tylenol so much he kept it on the kitchen counter.

I tapped on the door one more time, and Owen said, "I'm having some stomach problems. Do you need the toilet?"

"No," I said. "I'm fine."

The next forty-five minutes I smoked a couple more cigarettes, put the music back on and tried to read a little bit from a biography of Pol Pot I picked up from a used bookstore.

Owen came out of the bathroom and plopped down on my big, leather couch, almost as if nothing had happened. I sat at a circular, wooden table on the other side of the room. During that year we lived together he often disturbed me when I sat at that table trying to grade papers or struggling to work on something of my own. But he was an interesting person to talk to sometimes, if you could get past his eccentricities and his disregard of most basic social niceties. He had strong, strange opinions—but you knew where he stood. I often wonder if there's anyone to listen to him now.

"I want to apologize for all of that," he said. "I'm sure it didn't sound very good."

"No. It did not sound very good."

"I'm sorry."

He stared down at his dirty socks. He curled and uncurled his toes.

"You said you were going to kill yourself a couple times."

"Yeah. I know. I was upset. I'm still upset, but I'm not going to do that."

"You can't say stuff like that, man. It scares people."

"I won't do that again. I promise," he said, and looked me in the eyes.

"Okay," I said. "If you start feeling like that, talk to someone. Talk to me."

“Okay,” he said. “I will.”

“Everything will be fine,” I said. I went to the kitchen and wiped down the counters. Crumbs covered the floor so I grabbed the broom and started sweeping.

“Stephen?” Owen said. It sounded like he might be crying again.

“What is it?” I stepped back into the living room, broom in hand.

“Thank you for being concerned,” he said. His upper lip trembled and his nose ran freely. “I’ve never felt like anybody would care if I killed myself except my family.” He smiled. “And I’m not so sure about a few of my brothers.”

“Well, Jesus, Owen. Of course I’d care. You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I think so,” he said, still sniffing.

I returned to sweeping.

“Stephen,” Owen said.

“Yes, Owen?”

“You know what I think would make me feel better?”

“No, Owen.”

“Well—”

“What is it, Owen?”

“Nevermind. You’ve done enough.”

“Seriously, Owen. I don’t mind. What do you want?”

“Well—”

“Goddamit, Owen.”

“No, no it’s silly.”

“This is your last chance, Owen.”

“The new *Starcraft II: Heart of the Swarm* came out this week and I have a couple of games I could trade back and we just got our teaching stipend today and I think if I could just veg out on Starcraft all weekend I’d feel a whole lot better about everything.”

“Okay. That’s cool. You can play the video games all weekend. I wasn’t planning on using the television, really.”

“Yeah—”

“What is it, Owen?”

“Well—”

“You’re killing me, Owen.” I immediately regretted my choice of words, but Owen missed it completely.

“It’s just that my car—”

“Ah, I see,” I said. “Yeah, I’ll give you a ride. The Wal Mart on MLK?”

“Well, could we go to the GameStop by the mall?”

“All the way out there?”

“It’s just that Wal Mart doesn’t take trades.”

“Ok, Owen. We’ll go out to the mall.”

It was at least a pleasant afternoon for a drive. On the way back from the video game store, with the windows down, and with Mick Jagger singing about far away eyes on the classic rock radio station, Owen shouted over the music.

“Thanks for this, man.”

I turned down the radio a little and said, “No problem, O-man.”

“Hey, pull into that McDonald’s,” he said.

“Yessir,” I said. “A little hungry?”

“I wanted to buy you something,” he said. “For being so nice to me.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” I said. “Besides, I’m not eating meat right now, remember?” This was a brief fad I was going through.

“I want to get you something, though. Fries aren’t meat.”

“Alright. You can buy me some fries. If you insist.”

“I do insist. Some delicious fries on me.”

After the drive-thru Owen said, “I realize this has been a pretty ridiculous day.”

“Well, it’s been interesting,” I said.

“You can use me as a character if you want. I could be the protagonist in your Great American Novel.”

With a grin I said, “I don’t know, Owen. I think you might be more of a side character. Could you support the plot of an entire novel?”

Owen considered this gravely.

“I guess I do consider myself more of a side character,” he said.

I moved out of that apartment at the end of May, two months before our lease ended. I never wrote that great American novel. I live in the same town and work for the same school, writing speeches for the Chancellor of the university. Occasionally I saw Owen in the halls on campus in the years after I moved out. He looked much the same—usually disheveled and a little nervous. After I finished my graduate program I didn’t see him, though I did wonder what became of him from time to time. Last week, it was all over the Internet that he had won the National Book Award for poetry. I picked up the book today and recognized a couple of situations in some of the poems. I wasn’t mentioned in the acknowledgements in the back.

## VIII. Credit Card Jukebox

We were all sitting in a big booth at the bar. We were all having a good time. We had all just gotten off work. The jukebox took cards and someone had charged up fifteen dollars worth of David Bowie from all over his catalogue and there was smoke hanging in the air and a long day for us was done.

I didn't usually come out with these people after working a full shift at the grocery store but this day I had and I thought maybe I should do it more often.

We were all young.

Our manager, Candie, had come, and she was even younger than me and she was very pretty but she had a tendency to be single minded. There seemed to be sparks flying between Jade and Christopher and they found excuses to touch across the table and to laugh at everything the other said. Candie, too, squeezed next to Ben, but this was by then old news. I didn't have anyone, but I was content to see everyone else and to enjoy a beer or two or three.

Jade's phone began to ring and then her face pulled tight. Christopher grimaced and lit a cigarette and Jade reached across the table for his free hand and tried to smile. Jade's phone began ringing again and Candie picked it up and said, "she doesn't want to talk to you you leave her alone she doesn't want to talk to you." She put the phone on the table, screen facing down. Jade smiled a real smile and I lit another cigarette and we were all having a good time again.

We all sang, "I try! I try!" together and Candie kissed Ben on the mouth and Christopher and Jade gripped each other's hands. I laughed and went to the bar and switched to gin and tonic—a mistake I don't make as much as I used to.

"Who played the Bowie?" I said. I was really enjoying it.

"Johnny J," the bartender said. "At the end of the bar. He always plays Bowie."

“Good call, Johnny J,” I said. I lifted up my rocks glass in his honor. Johnny J grinned back at me.

When I sat down, Jade’s phone was ringing again and she was holding it in front of her and it looked like she was thinking of answering it.

“What are you *doing*?” Candie said.

“He keeps calling me,” Jade said.

“You don’t owe him anything,” Candie said. She pulled a cigarette out of Ben’s pack and lit it.

“If you ever need a place to stay—“ Christopher said.

“Shit, you can stay with me and Katie no problem,” Candie said. “You’ve got to fucking get out of there. He’s manipulative. Why can’t you come out with people after work? He’s crazy.”

Jade started digging through her purse. The phone rang again.

“Do you want me to talk to him?” Christopher said.

“Really ought to let *me* fucking talk to him,” Candie said.

Ben and I raised our eyebrows at each other across the table. He shrugged and offered up his rocks glass. I clinked it. Jade handed Candie the phone and started speaking loudly to Christopher. Maybe if she couldn’t hear what Candie was saying to Wade she could pretend it wasn’t happening at all.

“Wade, fuck off,” Candie said.

Jade asked Christopher about different hiking paths out of town.

“She can do whatever she wants. You don’t have control over her. She doesn’t want to see you,” Candie said. Ben patted Candie on the back.



Christopher joked with Jade about the dress she had been wearing the day before.

“No, fuck you,” Candie said. “It doesn’t matter where we are. She wants to be left alone.”

Jade stopped talking to Christopher and looked at Candie.

“Is he coming?” she said.

“Wade, leave her alone,” Candie said. Her voice broke and her eyes began to shine. Ben was rubbing her back, Christopher was staring at Jade and I felt out of place. I didn’t even know, really, who Wade was. Candie tapped the screen and put the phone down on the table.

“It’s okay,” she said. She smiled at Jade, but she was crying a little bit. “I’m sorry,” she rubbed her eyes. “That was fucking intense. He’s not doing anything. Just stay with us tonight.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” Jade said.

“Nothing good can happen tonight,” Christopher said. “We’ll stay out and you can stay with Candie.”

Jade exhaled, almost grunting. Her mouth turned down and her eyebrows pulled together. “Okay!” she said. She laughed. She pulled a cigarette from Christopher’s pack, and she doesn’t even smoke.

Again the mood returned and we were having a good time and we were laughing and I was getting to the point where I needed to stop or not plan on driving home, though I did end up driving that night.

Things were going in and out. Things had a kind of ephemeral quality. I remember most everything but I don’t remember everything that was said. We were all having a good time. The David Bowie wore out and somebody played *Rubber Soul*; all of it. Must’ve been six or seven dollars worth of *Rubber Soul* that someone charged on.

Christopher and Candie started arguing about the difference between a cappuccino and a latte—they had both once been baristas. I didn't know the difference between that stuff and coffee even.

Ben and I and Jade all laughed as they sparred about espresso specifics. They agreed on the definition of an Americano and it seemed that the tension had again diffused.

I felt I needed to hear some George Harrison and was looking for my card to feed to the bright machine on the wall next to the bar when a dark form appeared over Jade's shoulder. I was laughing at something Ben had said but I noticed that the girls were both looking over behind them and suddenly the room felt cold.

A bearded man knelt on the bench of the booth behind our booth. He loomed large over Ben and Candie and Jade. His body language communicated great anger, and this pulled the effect of the last couple of drinks away from me. He was smiling a little bit and his hands were sunk deep into his pea coat pockets, but somehow I could still tell that he was clenching and unclenching his fists. He said, "Jade, can I speak with you for a moment?"

"Don't go with him," Candie said. She was crying again.

"Just a minute, Jade? I need to talk to you."

"Don't fucking go with him."

"Why don't you mind your own fucking business, Candie?" he said.

"I don't want to talk with you," Jade said.

"Yes, you do," he said.

"Leave her a-fucking-lone," Candie said.

"Y'all all having a good time?" he asked. He smiled and looked around the table. "What about you, Chris? Having a good time?"

“Sure,” Christopher said.

“That’s great,” he said. “That’s great.”

“Hey listen, Wade—” Ben said.

“Hey, Jade, let’s fucking go outside already,” he said. “I’ll be waiting on the back porch.”

He eased off the bench and walked out the back door of the bar.

“Jade—” Candie said.

“Let me out,” Jade said.

She was resigned. I knew she would go. The way the lines seemed to appear on her forehead and around her eyes and mouth it seemed she knew there was nothing else to do.

“Let me come with you, at least,” Candie said.

“I’ve got to go listen to him,” Jade said.

“Why? How does he deserve this? He hunted you down after work. How did he even know we were here?”

“We sort of always come here,” Ben said.

Candie glared at Ben.

“Look, I live with him, Candie. What am I supposed to do, run away? I’ve got to go talk to him. Let me out.”

Ben got up and Candie slid out.

“I’m gonna come out and check on you,” Candie said. Jade didn’t say anything. She walked outside without looking back.

“Good grief,” I said. “Are they always like that?”

“Umm, they fight a lot. It’s never been like this until recently,” Ben said. He looked over at Christopher. “Right, Chris?”

Christopher had been staring down into the ashtray. “Yeah,” Christopher said. “What a fucking asshole.”

“I fucking hate him,” Candie said. She was shuddering and crying. “I hate him so much. Could you tell how *scared* she is of him? No one should have to feel that way. No one should have to feel that way.”

“It’s okay,” Ben said. He put his arm around her. “He wouldn’t hurt her.”

“Then why is she so *afraid* of him?” Candie said.

“I think it’s more of an emotional thing than a physical thing,” Christopher said.

“That’s even *worse*,” Candie said. She wiped her cheeks with her sleeves.

“Not saying it isn’t,” Christopher said. He started picking at the place where a cigarette sealed together and looked surprised when the paper broke and tobacco fell out onto the table.

“She needs to feel safe,” Candie said. “I just want her to know she’s safe.”

“She knows we’re right inside,” Ben said.

I had stumbled into something. I was feeling like it was about time to leave before Wade appeared, but now I felt I’d be abandoning everyone if I ducked out before the incident had come to a conclusion. The only solution was to get another drink, maybe a beer to slow things down. After I bought the beer I put my credit card into the jukebox and purchased some credits. I almost played ‘Love is a Battlefield’ but my better judgment prevailed. Instead, I picked some tracks off ‘Graceland.’ What evil could occur while Paul Simon played? Don’t say apartheid.

After a while Jade came through the back door. She walked down the hallway past the ladies’ room and the men’s room and waited for Candie and Ben to get up so she could scoot into the booth, against the wall, where she had been before. She looked better than she had when

she walked out but much worse than she had looked before Wade had appeared. Her mascara had smeared.

“What happened?” Candie said. “Are you okay? Did you dump him?”

“Nothing happened,” Jade said. “I’m fine. I told him I’m not coming home tonight.”

“And he just took it?” Candie said. “He just left?”

“Did you want him to hit me?”

“No. Jesus. Of course not,” Candie said.

“I’m just not gonna go back there tonight,” Jade said.

“You don’t need to ever go back there,” Candie said.

“It’s where I live,” Jade said. “It’s where my things are. How can I not go back?”

“Don’t worry about it tonight,” Christopher said. It was the first thing he’d said in quite some time.

“But you know you’ve got places you can go to. Don’t let that fucker intimidate you.”

Later I would learn that he always sort of blew in and then out of women’s lives in this way. He elbowed me and I let him out of the booth. He bought a round of shots and brought them to the table.

“Wait. Don’t drink them yet,” he said. He went over to the jukebox and put on some fuck-you-breakup-song I didn’t know. He laughed as he sat down and looked at Jade. She wasn’t laughing so much, and I felt like we weren’t going to have a good time anymore.

I stayed a little longer, but the times had changed. I imagine Candie went home with Ben and Jade went home with Christopher. I don’t know how that all got sorted out the next day. I remember though, before I left, how Jade sort of jumped every time a phone vibrated or beeped or rang.

## IX. Grieve If You Want

Angie drinks about a six pack a night these days. It doesn't really get her drunk and she's not mean or anything and she doesn't miss getting up early to teach, but it seems like something you might look back on and say, that's when the trouble started. When we first met, I was drinking a hell of a lot more than that and I wasn't so nice and I was missing enough work to lose my job, so I don't really feel it's my place to warn her about her drinking. She knows where it can lead, right? She helped me out of it.

Well, last night I was smoking a cigarette in the little red lawn chair outside our little rented house when my landlord came by. Mr. King is a grey haired, paunchy Vietnam vet who lives off whatever the Army still pays him and the rent from the three houses his mother left him. He told me about Vietnam one day when I was doing laundry in the basement of the house where he has a bed set up so he can sleep it off when he overdoes his daily visit to the pool hall down the street. He walked in shouting that he'd seen horrible things. Before that I just thought he was a mean old man. Now I think he must be a hero.

"Boy, I hate that you're a smoker," Mr. King said.

"Me too, Mr. King." I said. I always call him Mr. King. When I was signing the lease, I called him Daniel. I saw the look on his face and knew to never do it again.

"You're not a bad tenant, but lying when you first meet somebody ain't a good way to start off."

"You never asked if I smoked, Mr. King."

"It clearly says no smoking on the lease."

"I don't smoke inside. I promise I never will."

"You will if it gets real cold or real hot. It's almost June."

“Mr. King, I promise.” He looked off in the distance. Angie gave me a hard time about smoking too until I quit drinking. Then she let me be but it’s been about two years now and she’s started up again.

“Those girls next door been giving y’all any trouble?” he said. Three college girls live next door. I barely even ever see them, but apparently they—and actually he’s been telling me about this for three years so it wasn’t even the three girls who live there now—had a party *once* and they left some beer bottles in his trashcan and now he calls the cops if they do so much as park too close to my curb. One of them bumped the mailbox post once and he wanted to charge them a hundred dollars for him to replace it.

“I’ve never even met them,” I said.

“Well, keep an eye on them,” he said.

“Yessir,” I said.

“If you have any trouble, you don’t even need to talk to them about it. Call the law. If you have trouble, call the law.”

“I don’t think it will come to that.”

“I’m gonna bring you and your missus some meat real soon,” he said. He’s been telling me he’s going to smoke a pork butt for us since I moved in.

“Looking forward to it, Mr. King,” I said.

“I mean it. I’m gonna bring y’all some. I’ve just been having all these teeth problems.” He pulled his lip down with his two index fingers revealing silver stumps in his bottom gum. “I’ve got these anchors in here. But they still gotta install the teeth. Haven’t been eating well.” He started walking away, down the cracked sidewalk.

He turned around and said, “I don’t want to see any of those damned cigarette butts lying around.”

“Yessir,” I said. By then I was done with my cigarette, but I lit another as I watched old Mr. King putter off. I wondered what made Mr. King like he was. Who ends up an old drunk who bothers his tenants and all the other people who live near his properties? Was his childhood strange? Obviously the war didn’t help, but could we blame everything on that? Look at John McCain. Look at Oliver Stone. Even John Kerry, to a certain extent. Had he lost someone? His mother was dead. They say the space left by a parent could be crippling. I can’t imagine him having a woman, but he must have once, somewhere in his past. It’s circular to realize him incapable of having a woman now—I was trying to see him how he *was*.

But I don’t know enough about Mr. King to say. I know he drinks. I know he lives alone.

Before I went back inside I thought a little more about the idea of Mr. King losing someone close. Three days before Angie attended her cousin’s funeral, the son of her mother’s sister. Angie had never mentioned him to me. In the four years I’ve known her I never met him. But she seemed to be taking it hard. Harder than she took the death of her own sister two years before. I tried to get her to talk about him the night she returned from the funeral, but she said she didn’t want to. Her crying woke me up that night, but she didn’t want to be touched, to be consoled. She gave me her hand for a moment then pulled it away. Then I fell back asleep.

When I walked inside Angie stood at the refrigerator pulling out gallon ziploc bags of leftover food from her aunt’s house, where everyone gathered after the funeral. She poured some baked beans from the bag into a saucepan. She scooped out hunks of cold mashed potatoes into another pan. She placed large slices of honey-baked ham on a platter. She wore sweatpants and a



blue V-neck shirt that fit her tighter than it used to. Her dark hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail.

“Need help?” I said.

She turned on the stove’s gas burners and said, “Make yourself a drink, if you want.”

I bumped into her a little in the narrow kitchen to pull a cup out of the cabinet.

“You need one?” I said.

She lifted up her beer from where it sat on the stove. I dropped some ice cubes into the cup and filled it with tea. As I replaced the pitcher of tea in the refrigerator, I noticed there were only two beers left in the six-pack she’d brought home that evening.

I took a drink of the tea and looked out the window. The sun was shining, but rain poured down, decreasing visibility even a little ways down the street.

“Boy,” I said. “Been waiting on that rain for days now. Kind of a nice release when it finally comes.”

“Is that supposed to be sexual?” she said.

“I wouldn’t say all anticipation is sexual. Or would I? Damn. That’s kind of a glass half full glass half empty kind of a question, isn’t it?”

“You want your ham heated up? I’m just gonna eat mine cold.” she said.

“Cold is fine,” I said.

We’d been eating leftover funeral food for three nights. The first night I took a bite and immediately got up and found my journal and wrote down what a strange feeling it was to eat food from a funeral you didn’t even attend. Angie asked me what I was doing and I told her I just had an idea for a poem. She said, is it about eating this funeral food you didn’t even go to? I lied to her and said it was unrelated. I don’t know why I did that.

The next night she cried after remarking that it was an odd reminder to eat this good ham night after night and know that the only reason we had it was because her cousin died. That night she couldn't finish her meal. I was really hoping it wouldn't come up last night. I was also hoping maybe it would be the last night for the possibility. Angie tends to throw food out of the refrigerator earlier than I would, something we argue about extensively, but in this case it might be advantageous for everyone.

We don't have a kitchen table or a dining room or anything so we eat our meals on the couch. There are some chairs we put the plates on. I always use a chair, but Angie only uses one if the meal requires some support. Last night we both used them. I turned on a documentary about nuclear exposure in Kazakhstan, but we had to switch it over to *The West Wing* because the mutated orphans were too much for us while we were eating. I probably could've soldiered through, but Angie started feeling sick. I didn't mind. The world seems like a pretty nice place until you're sitting there watching footage of kids with swollen, tumored heads. Luckily, we can just turn it off.

We watched a couple of episodes and then it was nearly midnight. I started nodding off and asked Angie if she was ready for bed. She said she wanted to watch some more TV.

We don't go to bed together often. School's out for summer now so she doesn't have to get up at any particular time. When school is in session, I usually stay up a couple hours later than she does.

We've been together so long and I'm not sure either of us is really sure why. Four years. I think she thinks she knows, but I think she's afraid to really contemplate how it's all going. I'm not afraid to contemplate how it's going but for so long I've been afraid of doing anything about it. I always just thought she'd get tired of me and drop me. But she stuck with me through the

bad times, when I was drinking—although she tried to leave several times. I begged her, broken, crying, out of my mind, not to go. I think I forced her into a permanent decision somehow. And now that's all over and she already made up her mind that she was with me and I was with her. But seeing me like she saw me doesn't make for anything good. I'm not a man to her. And I think anyone who respected herself would have left.

When I was drinking I would make excuses for myself. Family history, frustrated ambition, bad breaks. I had a response for every critique of my behavior. Once she told me I made her feel like the girl in *Five Easy Pieces*. She said she didn't want to feel like a blonde bimbo who couldn't understand why she couldn't make her man happy. It wasn't fair that I got to be Jack Nicholson. Dark, complicated, intelligent, and complex. She said this in tears, and I was flattered. She was right to be upset about that, of course. There's no way she sees me that way now.

I wasn't thinking about these things last night. I was just thinking about how lonely you could be in a bed even with someone else in the other room. Someone who would even be in the bed in a matter of minutes or a matter of hours. But it wasn't enough. What could ever be enough? I don't know.

After a couple of hours of waiting for her to come to bed, listening to the show she was watching, trying to sleep but accidentally paying attention to the plot of *House* and knowing when the episode was about to end and realizing another episode was starting, she wasn't coming to bed yet, I got out of the bed and walked into the living room.

"Hey, you about ready to come to bed?" I said. I didn't have my contacts in so her face was a blurry form, and I stood wearing only boxers.

"I'm just not tired yet," she said.

“Come to bed,” I said.

“I won’t be able to sleep,” she said.

“You could just lie down,” I said.

“You’ll fall asleep and I’ll just be lying there,” she said.

“I just kind of want you to lay down with me,” I said.

“I don’t want to lie down. I’ll just be staring at the ceiling thinking about my cousin.”

I wanted to tell her that she wasn’t close to her cousin. I wanted to tell her that she wasn’t even sad about her cousin. That she was sad before, and that I was probably the reason, and why not just let’s talk about that. But I didn’t say that, and I don’t really know if she was close to her cousin or not.

“We never go to bed together,” I said. “Doesn’t that seem like a bad sign?”

“What?” she said. “What?” Her voice was high. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m not saying anything. Just, we should go to bed together at the same time sometimes, don’t you think? I’m only 28. And this makes me feel old.”

“My parents never went to bed together,” she said.

“Your parents got divorced when you were nine,” I said. “Is that the greatest example?”

“Oh my God,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I shouldn’t have said that. My parents still go to bed together, but I don’t think it really means anything.”

“So what are we talking about?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know. I’ll go back to bed.”

“We need to talk about this,” she said.

“I’m—it’s okay. I’m sorry I brought it up. I don’t know. I guess I was just in a funk.”

“No,” she said. “Let’s talk. What’s wrong?”

“I think I’m just so tired,” I said.

“I’m sorry. I would have turned the TV down.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah. It’s okay.”

“I’ll come to bed,” she said.

She came to bed, and we spooned for a while, but I think we were both kind of uncomfortable. My arm kept falling asleep. Neither of us could, though. I don’t think either of us slept the whole night. This morning she went to go see her mother for a couple of days.

So I’d been smoking for most of the morning in the little red lawn chair outside of our little rented house thinking of lots of reasons not to go the bar, or even the liquor store, both only one block away. I had one or two reasons to go find a drink, but this morning, as it is with almost every morning these days, I felt that the good would keep outweighing the bad.

Mr. King came around the corner of the house, a little out of breath. It startled me, as he usually comes from a direction where I can see him coming from a ways away.

“Goddamit, Sam. There’s cigarette butts all over this yard.”

There were quite a few cigarette butts, but they were mostly within one yard of the lawn chair. Furthermore, we don’t have a yard. The door opens up to a gravel alley dividing one row of houses from the next.

“I’ll pick them up, Mr. King.”

“Also, look at this,” he said, holding out a softball sized clump of dryer lint. “I told you I will not tolerate a dirty lint trap. I will not tolerate it.”

I realized that he was very drunk. This was odd, as usually he was just getting to the pool hall around this time, just after noon.

“I told you that a dirty lint trap will result in loss of basement privileges. I told you that. I told you that dirty lint traps are the leading cause of household fires.”

He had also once told me that errant cigarette butts were the leading cause of household fires. And, a different time, overloaded outlets.

“I apologize, Mr. King. I really do. I know how seriously you take these things. And I want you to know that I take them seriously, too. I’ll pick up the cigarette butts right now, and I’ll be more careful about the lint. I promise. I don’t know if it was me or Angie, but I’ll make sure to tell her, too.”

Mr. King didn’t seem to hear what I said. He dropped his hands to his side and the ball of lint fell to the gravel.

“Where is Angie?”

“She took a little trip,” I said. “Visiting her mom.”

“That’s nice,” he said. “This was my mother’s house, you know.” He smiled.

“Yessir,” I said. He told me this regularly.

“That’s funny timing,” Mr. King said.

“What does that mean?”

“She’s gonna miss out on this meat I been promising so long.”

“No way,” I said.

Mr. King chuckled. He cleared his throat. “You didn’t think I’d make good, did you? I was up all night smoking it.”

This explained why he was so drunk, I guess.

“I got it in a cooler in the car,” he said. “Been driving Beretta wild.” Beretta is his German shepherd. He often has her in the backseat of his car. “Come on, give me a hand with it.”

I followed his weaving, unsteady path around the house. His parking job was questionable. The front bumper of the little grey hatchback touched the concrete of the curb, but a significant portion of the rear of the vehicle angled out towards the street. Beretta leapt to the closed window and barked.

“Maybe you ought to have cracked a window for her,” I said.

“She’s okay,” he said. “Do this all the time.”

“It is getting warmer, though,” I said.

Mr. King tried the trunk door. He stiffened. Taking a step backwards he slapped his thighs, then his chest where his shirt pockets were, then both his back pockets.

“Shit,” he said. He circled the car, searching the ground. Beretta whined loud enough to be heard through the closed windows and Mr. King dropped to all fours. I couldn’t believe how fast he scrabbled across the pavement. He scraped his hands and knees across the coarse ground with little regard for what it did to his skin and clothes. His breathing was sharp and high pitched.

“Shit,” he said, still on the ground.

The entire car shifted down as he tried to pull himself up by the back bumper. It popped back up as his hand slid off and he fell back to the pavement, catching himself with his fists down on the ground.

I hurried over and gave him both my hands, almost falling over with him as I pulled him up. My hands came away covered in blood and grit. Scrapes on Mr. King's hand bled freely and his cargo pants were torn at both knees.

"Wow," I said. Now I was out of breath. "Are you okay?"

"My keys," he said. He slumped against the car, but his eyes continued to dart all around, scanning the grass beyond the sidewalk.

"Mr. King, you've got to relax. We'll find them." His breathing was starting to really worry me. Beretta barked and scraped her nails against the window.

"Sam," he said. "I don't have another pair. I don't have another pair of keys. No one has a spare."

"Look," I said. "How lost can they be? You drove here, didn't you?"

"I been down to the bar, I been by one of my properties on Bell Street. There's no telling. There's no way to know."

The day had warmed up and sweat stood out on my forehead. Beads as big as marbles flowed down Mr. King's face. His breathing didn't show any sign of slowing.

"All my keys to all my properties are on that keychain. I'm gonna have to get the keys from the tenants to replace them. Oh, shit."

"Let's not jump to conclusions," I said. "We've got some leads. Let's follow them."

I talked him into walking down to the poolhall and his other properties, to retrace his steps. We walked slowly, walking on both sides of the street, scouring the sidewalks and grass. We didn't come up with anything. After an hour walking around, looking through the poolhall, talking to another tenant (who seemed very ready to get Mr. King away from them), we made it



back to the car. I was sweating profusely, and Mr. King's entire shirt was soaked through. Beretta didn't bark anymore, she just looked out at us.

I walked around the car myself and looked at both sides of each tire. I tried every door handle as Beretta whined.

"What about triple-A?"

"You think I pay for that shit?" Mr. King said.

"Short-term solution anyway, I suppose," I said.

"Goddam, it's too hot," Mr. King said, looking in at the dog.

"Mr. King, I really think you ought to sit down," I said.

He sat down right on the sidewalk.

"This never would've happened to my mother," he said.

"Let's just take deep breaths," I said. To my horror he began to sob.

"Goddamit," he said, his shoulders heaving up and down.

My immediate impulse was to walk away from him and go inside, but I couldn't very well leave him out there on my sidewalk. I put a hand on his shoulder, getting some of the dried blood on his soggy white fishing shirt. I had nothing to say. I listened to him cry for a moment or two.

"It's okay," I said.

"Get me a brick," he said, gasping. "I guess I'm gonna break the fucking window."

"Listen, we could still find these keys."

"There's those old bricks by the stairs down to the basement."

"One last thing," I said.

I looked to see if the basement was padlocked (leaving the basement un-padlocked could result in loss of basement privileges), and it was.

"I'll be back," I said.

I went in the house to get my own keys. For a nasty minute I couldn't find them, but I think I might have just been really into empathy at the moment because they were right by the door where I always leave them.

I went down to the basement and found his keys on top of the dryer. Mr. King didn't notice me coming back out of the basement. He just stared at Beratta from where he sat on the ground. I tapped him on the shoulder and gave him the keys.

Mr. King didn't say anything. He looked down at the bulky keychain in his hands. The only sound was his labored breathing until Beretta whined again. He looked up at the car and then right at me.

"Jesus," he said. He stood up, without any help. "It's always the last place you look." He rubbed his left eye and spat. "Guess I owe you some barbecue."

He opened the car and Beretta jumped out, breathing louder than Mr. King had been. Even from where I was I could already smell pork.

"You think this pork is okay to eat?" I asked.

"It's been in a cooler."

"To keep it warm."

"It's not mayonnaise," he said. "Relax."

"Mr. King, you should eat some of this with me," I said. "We've been running around all day. You were up all night."

"I got to get going," he said.

“At least let me get Beretta some water.”

He followed me inside, carrying the cooler, Beretta at his heels. I filled a big plastic mixing bowl with water and she slurped it up. We took the aluminum wrapped hunk of meat out of the cooler and put it on a cutting board. I pulled out a chef’s knife.

“You won’t need that,” Mr. King said. “Give me two forks.” The forks went through the bark then through the rest of the shoulder like butter.

We sat on the couch and ate. I had some pretty good barbecue sauce, but I only used a little because I could see it sort of insulted Mr. King. We put some pork on a plate for Beretta and she joined in with the feast. We didn’t speak to each other as we gobbled down the tender, still steaming pork. I felt I had a sort of chance to get to know Mr. King a little better while we ate, but to break through the solemnness and seriousness of our grunts and swallows seemed a great impropriety. After we ate Mr. King left. He said he had to go get a Busch and headed towards the pool hall, Beretta right behind him.

I sit on the couch. The plates, dirty from pork, sit on top of the plates, dirty from ham, on the two chairs Angie and I ate off last night. I had expected Mr. King to comment on the left out dishes, but I suppose it had been a very long day for him. The little house feels exceptionally empty to me now—as empty as it felt when Mr. King showed Angie and I around three years before. A place we were then both excited to move into. I was still drinking, but I hadn’t bottomed out yet. I was still drinking, but we were in love. The house had been unfurnished and empty but it had been clean and it had felt less empty than it feels now, full of our things, the things that we’ve brought together, and I wonder if Mr. King’s house feels this way every night.